

The Prince and the Seven Dwarves

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The Prince and the Seven Dwarves

by [Tree_Writer](#)

Summary

Albedo and Lisa sat down and rewrote (and of course illustrated) some fairytales for the children of Mondstadt. Though this time, the characters are those beloved faces that almost everyone has seen or heard of; from one of adventurers from the guild, to the mysterious boy in the forest.

Today's story: Snow White and the Seven Dwarves

Notes

Okay so welcome to my Mondstadt Fairytales! I have a lot of these planned, but I went a little overboard with this one so it goes first (definitely not because it's the only one I have written so far)

Yes, there are warnings for Chapter 1 :D

- Graphic depictions of violence
- Mass murder

- Parental death

Chapter 1 - Once Upon A Time

Once upon a time, there was a flourishing kingdom that lay in the heart of a mystical forest, far from prying eyes that might wish to invade. Though rather small compared to those on the outskirts, the human kingdom, Mondstadt, had a thriving economy with well established trade routes that reached far and wide. Relations with neighbouring kingdoms were positive, enriched by the many deals that gave them financial and political stability.

The King himself was an adventurous man by the name of Cyrus, who could spin many a tale about the adventures of his youth; from the southern mountains to the lair of a dragon nestled in the west, his stories stretched far across Teyvat.

But every adventurer must have their last. Most would journey until the end, or until they were run off their feet by age, and usually, it was a sorrowful tale. In the case of Cyrus, he came home with the greatest prize of all. Shortly after his coronation, with the new title of King, he sought out one last thrill, travelling to the far corner of the world to a plain scorched barren and constantly ravaged with fire. Yet deep among the forest of flames, lay a treasure, one greater than anything he could've hoped for. Rather than silver or gold, gems or jewels, was a small bundle of blankets, only noticed by the King because of the sound it made: a baby's cries.

No kind-hearted person could leave the infant there, and Cyrus was no exception, the desperate cries nearly bringing tears to his eyes. He returned to the kingdom with the child cradled in his arms, after the search to find its parents proved fruitless.

On the day of the baby boy's arrival in the kingdom, the people celebrated - not only for the return of their King, but at the arrival of an heir - with song and dance, the little baby giggling at the colourful confetti tossed in the air as if it were the most amusing toy money could buy. That night, as Cyrus sat in bed with a book, and his new son nestled in the crook of his arm, the thought of a name for the child returned to his mind. To survive in such a place, and be found at all was a miracle to say the least, the boy was blessed with the gift of survival, and Cyrus was equally blessed to have a little one to call his own. So he named the child Bennett; his little blessed one.

As he grew, so did the kingdom's love for the little prince and his cheerful, yet somewhat shy nature. His adventures through the village - guided by his father or one of a select few knights - becoming a comfort to the people. Seeing his little waves from behind his guardian's legs, the way he completely lit up and crafted fun games with the other children, his adorably pathetic attempts to copy his father when he came out to work while watching over his son - all fuelled the love that the people had for their rulers. It didn't feel long at all by the time his fifth birthday neared in the later part of February, when snow still blanketed the land.

Safe from the cold outside, wrapped in the warmth of the castle, King Cyrus was caught up in a

search for the source of the little giggles occupying the throne room. But his son was *very* well hidden, the only sign of him being a set of toes sticking out from behind the throne.

“Now, where *is* he hiding?” Of course there was nothing behind the curtain, nor the suits of armour. “Not here...hmm, not there.”

The duo’s antics never failed to merit a quiet chuckle from the knights on duty, and today was no exception.

“Why, Huffman, you wouldn’t have happened to see Benny anywhere? I’m afraid I’ve lost him.” He turned to the young knight, this one in particular having already grown close to the little Prince.

“No sire, perhaps he wandered outside?”

“Oh I hope not, after all, we wouldn’t want him to run into the Snow Queen out there.” The King lowered his voice, only just enough for his son to hear about the make-believe queen. “She doesn’t like me very much, not after I stole her sleigh.”

Now *that* was a story Bennett had never heard before, and as always, the temptation of a new story worked like a charm, the Prince himself tumbling out from behind the throne in a rush to get to his father.

“Ah, there he is!” Cyrus scooped him up just as the little one lost his footing - consequence of his clumsy feet tripping over each other. “Careful there Little Bee. My, for you to run that fast, you must really want to hear this story?”

“Mhm! Yeah!”

“Alright, alright,” he chuckled as he took his place on the throne with Bennett on his knee, “what do you know of the Snow Queen?” His voice dropped to a warm whisper, as if the Snow Queen were nearby and might overhear. But that just made it all the more exciting.

“Uhm...” Just like his father, his finger tapped his chin in thought, arm crossed across his chest with his face scrunching - which earned a light chuckle from the onlookers. “Oh! She’s the queen of the snow! And’...ooh! She gots snowman guards!”

“She does indeed. Well, did you know about her magical sleigh?” The little Prince shook his head. “On a snowy night, it glides through the air, up above the clouds to slide on them like ice, leaving a trail of snow falling behind her.”

“Oooh, is that where snow comes from?”

“It is! Now, one day, I was stuck in a vast snowy land, with no sign of a village anywhere. I couldn’t even see the sun because the clouds were so dark. Now, I knew I had to get above the clouds to find my way, and that was when I heard the jingling of sleigh bells.”

He gasped in wonder. “The Snow Queen!”

“She was flying high above me, all the way on top of the clouds. But, the bells were getting closer, and then, I saw the sleigh descend through the clouds, with the Snow Queen holding the reins, and two beautiful white horses carved from ice leading the way. And so,” he gave a quick glance to the knights entering the throne room, “as she landed and stepped out of the sleigh, I jumped in and flew up into the sky!”

“Wow!”

“And I flew aaall the way home!”

“Your majesty-” The knights stopped themselves to spare father and son from parting just a moment longer, smiles on their faces.

“And, and, and’ what about the sleigh?”

“Well, a week later she came to get it back! Without her horses, it took an entire week to get here, and she was *not* happy at all. That winter, the snow fell harder than ever. And that was the winter I found you, My Little Bee.”

“Was it really?!”

“The very one.”

“Your majesty,” both royals turned to look at the knight who stepped forward, “pardon the interruption, but the horses are ready outside.”

“Thank you Miles, I’ll be out in just a second.”

With a bow, the knights headed back outside, and Cyrus turned to the little boy on his knee, a pout on his face. “Aw don’t worry, I’ll be back in time for your birthday.”

“Do you have to go Papa?”

“Well I need to get you your present, don’t I? Otherwise you’ll never get to see it.”

“But, but, can’t I come?”

“Not yet, Benny. Besides, a surprise is no fun if you know what it is beforehand.” A little flick of his nose brought the giggles back to Bennett, the bubbly laughter remaining as he was placed on the floor and hand in hand, the two walked outside.

“Horsies!” The knights couldn’t help but smile at the curiosity of the little Prince, eyes wide with wonder as he was lifted up to pet the mane of the horse.

“Do you remember her name?”

He hummed in thought. “Pippa?”

“That’s right, and Pippa will bring me back in a few days, I promise. And in the meantime, you can make something to show me.”

“What with?”

“I’m sure Huffman will be able to find something for you, he might even take you on a little adventure through the castle if you ask him nicely.” The knight in question nodded in agreement as he took the Prince in his arms with a smile. As one of the younger knights, Huffman had become Bennett’s unofficial babysitter, always making fun games and making sure he was cared for whenever the Prince came to him searching for a game to play while his father was busy.

“Yeah! I’ll make something! Something big! And cool!”

“I look forward to it, My Little Bee. I’ll see you soon.” With a final kiss on his son’s forehead, the King rode off with his knights in tow, turning to wave with that huge smile on his face. It was only when they were completely out of view that Huffman took the Prince back into the castle.

“Now, do you have any ideas what you’d like to make for your papa?”

“Hmm...a horsie!” Bennett threw his arms in the air, inspiration flooding his eyes.

“Well then, let’s go find some clay.”

The adventure through the castle to find the clay stretched across a few hours, up and down the towers, in and out the storage rooms, it took them all over the place. By the time the adventure was through, it was time for the little Prince to go to bed, his surprise for his father having to wait until the next morning.

Even after it was done - turning out in a delicate mix of clumsy and perfect - the little adventures created by the castle staff continued to keep Bennett entertained, with never a dull moment. When one staff member had to return to work, another would step in, guaranteeing a few days of endless fun while his father was away.

But those few days turned into a week, and that week turned into two, and before he knew it, it was the day of his birthday. Yet still the time dragged on. Three weeks, a month, two months. Then by that point, it became a question of how long could they hide the truth from the little Prince, who’d remained completely clueless as to why the staff looked at him with pitiful eyes, why some would excuse themselves as soon as he asked after his father, why Huffman’s games hadn’t been the same - his eyes as pitiful as the rest of them. His father was just late, was he not? Very, very late. Perhaps he got caught up with the Snow Queen and her sleigh. But there was no snow outside, it had all melted by now.

“Huffman?”

“Yes, your highness?” The knight sat on the end of his bed after a game of hide and seek, a smile on his face.

“Are you sad?”

“N-now why would you think that?”

“Your games are...different.”

“I suppose they must be...I’m sorry, they must not be very fun now.”

Bennett clambered up to sit next to him, then crawled across onto his knee, supported by the knight the entire way. “Why are you sad?”

“Well...” The little Prince looked up at him with those innocent green eyes, filled to the brim with concern for his best friend, unexpectant of the news to come. How could he tell him? It was hard enough lying about it until the Prince’s birthday was long gone, but to actually *tell* him was an even harder task. For at that moment, Bennett wasn’t worried about himself, or about the possibility of what he would be told, but about Huffman - and how could he deliver that news? The news of-

Screams of agony outside saved Huffman from the conversation, but brought around new worries. Before they even reached the window, the knight could tell death lingered in the air, so he put down the little prince, with the window being too high for him to peer out and see the massacre below. Knights were being flung aside like mere toy soldiers, as lifeless as their wooden counterparts. Staff untrained in combat weren’t spared their lives, screaming in hopeless death as they were impaled with spears of ice, the commander of the frozen blades walking through the courtyard as if death didn’t clear its path. An Abyss Mage. Huffman would recognise one anywhere, rumoured to lurk in the outskirts of the lands, they usually only attacked humans unfortunate enough to cross their paths, never daring to invade a kingdom like this. Yet here it was, invading the perfect target: The Kingdom without a King.

The Mage cackled as those who dared to face death itself fell at its hands. It floated over the victims with little care as to the blood streaming over the cobbled path, seeping into the earth at either side. The safety of the castle walls had been betrayed, lined with the suits of armour pieced around humanoid forms of what could only be described as living shadows.

"Huffman? What happening?" Bennett tugged on his hand, holding it as he filled with fear from the harrowing screams coming from not just the courtyard, but the kingdom.

"We need to go." He scooped up the Prince, bringing him close to his chest to shelter him from the frightful sights outside. But as they got to the door, Huffman's hand lingered on the handle as the Abyss Mage's screeches echoed through the courtyard.

"Attention to those of you believing you are safe inside!"

Only Bennett dared to look back at the window. With the courtyard still out of view, he was spared the horror of seeing those who helped raise him dead or dying on the floor like hunted animals. Yet fate was unkind, and the Mage even more so, its words ringing clear.

"Your king is dead! You have no ruler! Those of you that remain, surrender to me, and you shall be spared!"

"But...Papa's the King." Those innocent eyes turned back to Huffman, now brimming with tears just as delicate as the prince himself. "Is he...did he died?"

Fighting back his own tears, as well as hiding his emotions with a sad smile, wasn't easy in the circumstances. The sight of the small boy's tears only tugged at his heart more, urging him to cover up the truth for another day, to let him enjoy another day of fun, another game, another day waiting was better than a day of losing. But Huffman knew it was cruel to leave him in the dark like that, there wasn't just today to think of anymore. And with the Mage threatening to come in and slaughter everyone, would he even survive until tomorrow to tell Bennett of his father's untimely death? "I...I'm afraid so, Benny."

"But he'll come back? How long will Papa be?"

"He...I'm sorry, he's not...he's not coming back."

"Ne-never?"

Huffman couldn't tell which one of them was trembling, but still, he continued. "Never, I'm

sorry..."

"N-no...no! He's gotta come back! He...Papa has to! He promised! He *promised*!"

"I know...I know, and I'm sorry..." Huffman found himself weeping silent tears alongside the Prince clinging to him, burying his face in the knight's side to muffle his sobs and cries for his father's return. He wished he could grant the little boy's wishes, just as he'd done a thousand times before with his games, with the miniature adventures Bennett would insist he join in with every time. Sneaking through the castle with feigned dangers and traps for them to dodge, all to rescue the treasure from the clutches of whoever they could convince to join them - the Prince's imagination brought the adventures to life. Yet this time, no amount of imagination could bring what he truly needed into reality, his father was dead and gone, not only that, new and real dangers were waiting just beyond the window for the little Prince with a big weight now shoved on his shoulders.

Despite his sorrow, Huffman finally opened the door and rushed past the flurry of knights preparing for battle, down the stairs, through the kitchens, down another set of stairs until he eventually reached the servants' quarters. As he burst through the door, he called for the head of the household staff herself; "Adelinde!"

"Huffman! What's going on out there?!" She rushed over, a hoard of worried staff watching them.

"There's an...a small problem, but-"

"Adelinde." Head of the knights and the King's personal protector, Varka, burst into the room. "An Abyss Mage is attacking the castle, we'll need anyone who can fight-"

"An Abyss Mage?...What's that?" With a small sniffle, the Prince lifted his head, face still soaked by the tears of grief. At the child's words, the entire room fell silent, a look of mild horror coming across Varka's face as Huffman turned around and he finally noticed Bennett.

"It's just something the knights need to speak too, don't worry, your high-majesty." Adelinde took the Prince into her arms, wiping his tears with her handkerchief. "You can stay down here with me until they're done."

A little more than a shaky nod was his answer, burying his face in her side as he resumed his crying, while a solemn nod was all Huffman needed to explain the reasoning behind the Prince's

tears. Varka cleared his throat to call the young knight to his side, but he found Bennett still holding onto him with one hand, his tiny hand clutching what little of his sleeve he could pull out from under his armour.

“Benny, I need to go now.”

“Mm-mh!”

“Huffman will be back soon, he promises.”

“That’s - that’s what Papa sah-said! But, but - but he didn’t!” The words were forced out, his face only retreating further into Adelinde’s side, but though his sobs were hushed and muffled, the impact was piercingly loud and sent the adults into a long silence. Only the sounds of the battle upstairs filled the air, until finally, Varka stepped forward.

“Huffman, your orders are to stay here with his highness and protect him should anything happen.”

“Understood sir.”

“Now,” Varka turned to the staff watching from the corner, “I’ll need anyone who’s willing to fight to come with me.” Only a few brave souls followed him out of the room to join the fight.

As the door to the servant’s quarters closed, another opened. The castle fell into the clutches of battle, if it could even be called as such. Knights dropped like flies, with the untrained falling even faster, some didn’t even have a chance to draw their weapons, killed with a single glance from the invader. Blood pooled over the wooden floor, desperately running from the bodies to join the river flowing in under the Abyss Mage’s feet. By the time the screams of agony reached those hidden away, their makers were already gone, abandoning their dying screams to echo down the stairwells to the servant’s quarters.

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The kingdom fell in just a few hours, in what couldn’t be described as a triumph, but a mere slaughter. Those who chose to live another day and surrender were rounded up and forced to their knees in front of the Abyss Mage, with the few brave enough to keep up the fight now dead around them.

“You,” it spoke with harsh tones, its voice screeching around the throne room, “are the pathetic ones. You chose to surrender, it’s nothing noble, even if you are plotting a future resistance, it’ll fail just like this one. You’ll join your friends over there eventually.”

None of their eyes followed the Mage’s hand to the pile of bodies being collected by the suits of haunted armour, numerous familiar eyes locked wide with despair in their final moments. Instead they kept their eyes fixed on the ground, all except Huffman. At the very back of the crowd of cowering staff, the last remaining knight cradled the still sniffling Prince, with arms holding him as close as he could to protect him from the horrific sights around them.

“Now, I want this blood cleaned up and-” One particularly loud sniffle brought the eyes of the blood-splattered mask to look right at Huffman. “You, Knight, stand.”

Stifling his fear, he did as told, rising to his feet with trembling hands. At the sudden flux of movement, Bennett shifted his head from the safe darkness of Huffman’s side, and instead met the eyes in the mask of the Mage. It drifted over to stand before him and laugh. The cold aura froze the Prince into a statue of fear, his shaking breath crystallising in the air as it escaped him.

“*This* is the Prince?!” It cackled, drawing a blade of ice from thin air. “Well, I won’t have any trouble taking care of you.”

“No!” Huffman held the child closer, unsure of who was shaking more between the two of them. As Bennett hid his face in his side again, Adelinde rushed to his aid.

“Don’t hurt him!”

“He’s a threat to my new throne.”

“He’s a *child!* Don’t you have any mercy?!” The head housemaid stood between them, sheltering the Prince in her shadow.

“Not. A. Speck. Now, out of my way, human.”

Yet she didn’t move. Even as the Mage made to move forward, Adelinde stood her ground, hiding

the fear in her eyes, her trembling hands, her shaking breath. All in hopes of saving the little boy that cowered behind her.

“You are foolish to stand in my way.”

“You’re the foolish one if you think I am going to stand by and let you hurt him.” A tiny hand clutching her sleeve gave her enough courage to continue. “Now I may not be his mother but I helped raise him as if I was, so if you’re brave enough to step between mother and son, *try*.”

No more words were exchanged for the Prince’s life, as the Abyss Mage simply looked her up and down, let the blade of ice melt into a puddle before returning to the throne. A sheen of ice crept over the intricacies of the throne, into every crack of the carving, and over the floor around the base. Sharpened spikes extended outwards and upwards as a demonstration of just how powerful it was, how even just one of these spikes could kill any of them with just a flick of the Mage’s hand.

“If *any* one of you steps out of line, I will not be convinced a second time. Now leave.”

As they scurried off back to work, they knew that was it. Their lives as they knew them were over. The kingdom had well and truly fallen into the icy claws of the wicked. No one from the outside would help them. Even if they did have the strength to rebel, now that the Prince’s life constantly at risk, it was out of the question.

Chapter 2

Time turned on as it always would, ignoring the problems of the people whose lives depended on its movement. Time turned a blind eye to the ever-growing suffering of the people, the winters stealing more and more days from summer, with the weather only worsening each time the frost came around. Snow was a near constant for the kingdom, while the magical forest that failed to protect it was safe from the Abyss Mage's weather-changing wrath.

Thirteen years blurred into a cycle of suffering that would one day end in death for the poor, as the Mage's newfound love of wealth only grew. With no one to help them, they were left to fend for themselves, the village streets becoming ridden with people begging for whatever they could, while others held onto what little they had.

Though trapped under the malevolent eye of the Mage, the little Prince grew into a warm-hearted boy, raised and protected by what little staff remained. With a bright smile, he lit up the gloomy castle as the last glimmer of a life they once knew, and his adventurous spirit still as untameable as ever. Whenever he could, Bennett would peer out of windows, over the walls, through the gates to wonder what was out there, before he was snapped back to reality by another load of work from the Abyss Mage.

Which was exactly where he found himself a few days before his eighteenth birthday; at the window in one of the many exquisitely decorated hallways, looking through the window at the stretch of forest. The wall of falling snow had been expanding lately, reaching into the depths of the forest to stir whatever magical creatures dwelled among the trees. Any day now it would reach the other side, and who knows if it would stop. But what was on the other side? He could recall his father telling him of the many lands he'd ventured to, though most of the stories were passed to him by the staff. Lands full of fire, others submerged in water, islands where the lightning roamed free in a constant storm. Any one of them just tugged on his heart, urging him to go find them, to discover their sights, to meet their people-

“*Ahem.*” The croaking voice startled him out of his thoughts, flinching for a second time when he came face to face with the Mage. “I thought I told you to clean the steps in time for my visitors.”

“Y-yes, uhm, yes, you did...” He shrunk back against the wall as a blade of ice formed in the hand of the creature who wanted him dead. After all these years, he'd grown less afraid, yet that was only when there was someone there with him, but now he was alone, the hallway only containing the Shadow Knights that wouldn't dare step in the way of their leader.

“Still a good-for-nothing thorn in my side, still relying on other people. Let me guess, one of *my* other servants is out there cleaning them for you?” It got closer.

“N-no, I was just about to-” And closer.

“I don’t want to hear it. Because this time, there’s no one to protect you.” *Closer*. It raised the dagger to finally rid itself of the pest, the unlucky thorn that had been plaguing the castle with hope. One swipe of the dagger and the Prince would be dead and gone for good this time. No one to stop it, no Adelinde, no Huffman-

“Sire,” relief washed over Bennett as the last Knight stepped between them, “I’m sorry to interrupt.”

The Mage let the blade melt away with a groan. “What is it?”

Huffman nudged the Prince to leave, to run away and hide. But he stayed. Whether from fear or worry, Bennett stayed right behind Huffman, his hands finding their way to cling to the Knight’s arm just as he did as a child. “I just got word that the Queen of Wolvendom may be running late, due to some trouble on the road.”

“Yet another inconvenience. Well little Prince, it seems you’ll have time to clean the steps after all.” With that, it floated off down the hallway, frustrated mutters fading out of earshot.

“Thank you.” He released the breath he’d been unknowingly holding, as well as releasing Huffman’s arm from his grip.

“You’re welcome,” he glanced over at the window, “I know you tend to like this window, and Adelinde said you weren’t outside.”

“I...I got distracted again.” Bennett’s smile quickly surfaced as he chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, before they set off towards the kitchens.

“I know, you’ve got your head in the clouds.” He ruffled his hair. “But you know you need to keep your eyes down here, that’s the third time this month that thing has nearly killed you.”

“Ah, no, only twice. I *fell* off the wall, I wasn’t pushed.”

Huffman sighed as he opened the door. "That's not better."

"Oh Bennett! You're okay!" Adelinde rushed over like a worried mother fretting over her child.

"Of course I am, Addie!" He said with that usual bright smile. "I can't stay long, gotta go clean the steps! Otherwise I'll be in even more trouble!"

They both watched him pluck a bucket from the top of the stack, fill it with water and skip out the door, only ducking back in with another smile and a wave as he grabbed a cloth. Then the door closed again.

Outside, the cold bit at his ears first, the last fragments of winter fighting as spring threatened to come. But despite the struggle, signs of the last fleeting spring were already returning. Blades of grass broke through the layer of snow that had been pushed off of the path to bury what little life persisted. Bees buzzed around in the air as they searched for what few flowers they could, drawing Bennett's eyes to them. In their search, they carried the memories, his memories, of a time long past on delicate wings, their hums of work joining the Prince's own little tune.

The melody was soon joined by the repeated splash of the cloth dipping into the bucket, then the sound of scrubbing. Chores like this were no problem for Bennett, especially when they were outside. They gave him the time to think about what lay beyond the walls, beyond the forest and what waited for him out there. His imagination ran wild with possibilities, he could travel all the way around the world, speak to someone who'd never even heard of Mondstadt, somewhere where his father had never been - that would be a thrilling adventure, from what he'd been told, it sounded like his dad had been everywhere. He might even stumble across the place he was found all those years ago, in the land made barren by fire.

"Ouch!"

But of course, his daydreams couldn't stay uninterrupted, though this time it was by someone new - a rare sight in the castle - standing on his hand.

"Ah, sorry! I wasn't looking where I was going."

His eyes were drawn skyward to the first new face Bennett had seen in years, meeting the pair of dull, yet kind red eyes looking back at him. Framed by a mane of thick, silver hair, his face failed

to make much of an expression, at the very least resembling an apologetic look. Yet Bennett's eyes were drawn even further up to the two pointed wolf ears nestled among his hair, before they jumped back down to meet his eyes once again.

"No, no, it's okay, I—" Getting to his feet proved a challenge when his legs were unknowingly shivering from the cold. His foot slipped off the side of the step and would've sent him tumbling if the stranger in front of him didn't catch him in the safety of his arms first.

There they stayed, simply looking at each other in silence void of awkwardness. Something about the stranger tinged a sense of familiarity in his heart - the part that wished and longed to dream. Though his mind couldn't quite figure out how. The strong arms of another around him? How he pulled him closer ever so gently? The hint of a smile breaking through that stoic face? Or how his eyes slightly softened as he was only pulled deeper into the gaze they shared? Whatever it was, he couldn't place his finger on it, but relished the moment nonetheless.

The stranger brought with him an air of adventure, the greatsword on his back laden with signs of wear, the blade dull and burdened with notches from previous fights. The bag over his shoulder was decorated with a few trinkets Bennett couldn't pin a location to. Even his scars plastered over his skin seemed to have an exciting story to tell. Yet, beneath all that, lay an aura of mystique, something kept hidden from the rest of the world-

"Your highness—"

The sudden interruption hurled them out of their gaze, startling the stranger to the point of dropping Bennett - which of course, with his luck, resulted in him landing in the bucket of water with a *splash*.

"Sorry! I don't know what's gotten into me today—"

"No it's okay, I'm used to this—"

"- I'm not usually this—"

"- You see I'm rather—"

"Clumsy." They both said at the same time as the Stranger's hand out-stretched to him.

"Your highness, my apologies for uh...interrupting."

Bennett nodded and whispered his thanks as the stranger - who seemed to be some sort of Wolven Prince - hoisted him to his feet.

"But we should be heading inside now. The Queen is inside waiting for you to join her before you head in." The Prince's Travelling companion took the few steps down to join them.

"Just a moment, Alvar, I'll be there shortly."

"Sire, we do not want to keep the King waiting on her majesty's behalf."

"You're...here to see the... *King* ?" Bennett glanced between the two, his gaze ending on the Prince, who gave a simple nod as an answer. "Wait hold on, you're a Prince?"

The Wolven Prince chuckled, rugged and raspy, barely resembling that of a laugh. Completely rough around any edge it formed, but oh how warm it was. "I am, yes."

"Oh! Then I need to bo- *OW* -" As he dropped into a bow, he couldn't get away without slipping off the back of the step, so for the second time, he was caught in the Prince's arms.

"You just can't stay on your feet today, huh?"

"How can I when such a charming prince keeps catching me?"

The Prince's face flushed with a hue of pink, utterly destroying his stoic manner, his wolf features secretly breaking it even further as his ears folded back and his tail wagged, their movements clearly unknown to their owner. After a few moments of stammering, and a clear of his throat, he was quick to change the subject. "Well, I- I think after saving you twice now, I'm owed a name."

"Hm, no, you owe me first because you dropped me in the bucket." He hopped back onto his feet with a giggle.

"Prince Razor," he bowed, "of Wolvendom. Now do I get one in return?"

“You do indeed - and I promise not to slip this time.” With a playful smile, and far more success, he bowed with every step as perfect as he was taught, the only thing missing being his long-stolen title. “Bennett, of Mondstadt.”

“Sire, we really must be going, we are running late as it is.”

“Alright, I’m coming,” he sighed and turned back to Bennett, “Will I see you on my way out?”

“I’ll clean as slowly as possible.”

A smile stuck on both of their faces as they parted ways, with one heading into the castle, while the other scrubbed its steps. Yet no matter how slow he worked, the work crept on by, he inched his way down the steps with every minute. Even by the second hour, by the time he reached the end of the final step, the doors hadn’t opened.

~

But the Wolveen Prince came back the next day, and the next, and the next, always told to wait outside by his mother as she went inside for meetings with the mage. Instead of by his window of daydreams, Bennett would be found working in the courtyard, taking whatever jobs he could to hear the tales of afar that Razor brought with him, along with the promise that one day, he’d take him on an adventure of their own. The stories grew in number with every day, every week that they met, and their friendship blossomed like the flowers on the trees they often sat under as spring finally took over the land. Though fleeting in exchange, their joyful chats filled the air before the meetings, but after? Oh they’d lose track of the hours as they flew by. Stories of Razor’s adventures throughout the forests and lands unknown were traded for ones of Bennett’s father or some of the ones made up from his childhood.

The castle staff couldn’t be happier with the friendship, anyone who passed through the courtyard did nothing but smile at the pair. Huffman spared no effort giving Bennett more tales of his father and of his childhood adventures, and Adelinde was more than happy to provide snacks and drinks for the two princes.

“Going to scrub the steps again Bennett?” Adelinde looked up from chopping carrots for the Mage’s dinner.

"Yep!" He dug around in the cupboard for a cloth.

"You'll have to get water from the well today I'm afraid."

"Got it!"

"Now, which story will you be telling him this time?"

"Probably the one about the wind dragon."

Even the mention of the two's friendship brought a smile to her face. From the kitchen's she'd be able to hear their laughter as they told not just stories, but jokes and funny tales about anything and everything.

"You have fun, oh and remember to keep an eye out for the Mage--"

"I promise I will!" He scooped up the empty bucket as he skipped past into the yard, and out to the well. The smaller yard was hidden from all but a few windows, tucked away near a gate coated in vines that had been long forgotten by the Mage, the staff, and the Prince. His soft tune filled the air as the bucket dropped down into the depths of the well and into the darkness of the shaded water. With his mind and ears occupied, the sounds of the gate rattling once, then twice, were lost in the air. So as he was hoisting the bucket up a few seconds later, the pair of hands that settled around his waist practically made him jump out of his skin. The rope slipped out of his grasp and then-

Splash!

Silver hair brushed against his cheek as Razor peered over his shoulder to see the lost bucket floating idly. "Sorry... but I guess you won't be cleaning today?"

"Guess not," he chuckled, "and what brings you back here? Shouldn't you be going to meet the King?"

"I'm actually here for someone else today."

"Oh?"

"Mhm, for you," Out of the corner of his eye, Bennett could see a small grin sneak onto the face that had come to rest on his shoulder, "today's the day I take you on an adventure."

Oh he could barely contain his excitement, those words completely destroying his own as the spark inside of him erupted into a burning fire that was fuelled by the will to explore, to know and discover. The urge to squeal like a child who's just been given a shiny new toy was suppressed by the sheer disbelief that he would get to go on an adventure! A real adventure, just like his father!

"So, what do you say? We can go-"

"Yes! Let's go!" With the bucket quickly forgotten, and the mage gone from his mind, Bennett went rushing to the overgrown gate with a bright beaming smile. The constant glimmer in his eyes aglow with all the pure happiness he felt. As he reached for the handle, he got nothing but a handful of leaves, yet that didn't quell his glee.

"Come on," Razor was already perched atop the wall with a hand extended to him.

With a few seconds, and a little help, he hopped down on the other side of the wall. Already the forest was calling to him, beckoning him to wander through the undergrowth under the sunlight that fought through the leaf cover to scatter flakes of golden light across the forest floor, teeming with the life that spring brought with it. Insects scurried along in search of food and shelter, animals emerged with their young to teach them the ways of life, guiding them through before they parted. Even the trees seemed to bustle with the business of life, the gentle breeze gracing them with the freeing winds that had traversed the land further than anyone had ever been before. Beneath them, the flowers were blooming in spite of the jealous frost that once tried to end them and take over the land's beauty for itself, only holding a temporary crown before the true ruler returned with the strength of the sun's hopeful fire. A gentle gasp of awe escaped him as he gazed at the beauty of the forest that lay across the muddy path that separated the two worlds. Oh he'd never seen anything so, *so* beautiful.

"How about," Razor dropped down off the wall beside him, "we start with the village?"

"Sounds perfect."

Hand in hand, they set off towards the village, down the path alongside the castle walls. It wasn't long before the views changed from the enchanting forest to the village flooded with constant sorrow. The smell was the first thing to hit them, the stench of the sewers with an undertone of death smacking them around the face. Following that came the sights; rats running through the cobbled streets, which were plastered with a layer of mud, only the marks of carriages long gone parting it. While their parents worked for what little they could earn, children played in the streets, their voices echoing around the high stone buildings. But the whole place was void of colour, or at least, compared to the joyful shades of the forest it was. Even from just outside, he could see it was ever so different from the small town buried deep in his memory, with the sights and sounds of his childhood gone with the people's hopes.

Yet as they stepped within the borders of the village, Bennett's mind urged him to stop and hide behind the side of a building. For what if they recognised him after all these years? After all, he wasn't allowed to leave the castle, and had been so caught up in his excitement that it had slipped his mind. Now what if the Mage found out through the chatter of the villagers, it would undoubtedly kill him, but what if it decided to kill whoever saw him or spoke of him? He couldn't put their lives on the line for something as simple as an adventure.

"Benny? What's wrong?" Of course his efforts to hide hadn't gone unnoticed by the Wolven Prince.

"It's just uhm...I should've told you I'm...not really supposed to be out of the castle..."

All Razor could do was stammer, struggling to find the right words to feed his curiosity, while also trying not to pry. But what did one say to that? Would you like to go somewhere else? Do you want to go home? Many possibilities came to mind yet none made it to his mouth, stuck halfway and left unsaid.

"The uh...King is...strict, you see, and if I were seen..."

"Well," he slipped his coat off and wrapped it around Bennett's shoulders, "nothing wrong with a little teenage rebellion every now and again. But we can always go somewhere else if you'd like?"

As he pulled the hood up over his head, Bennett peered around the side of the wall at the main road of the village, the square just in sight. People busied around like bees, working for their lives and the lives of their children. The usual song of the village was muted by their suffering, yet still they sang in their own way, the sounds of their work filling the air with the bubbling melody of their chatter over the top. But that didn't stop them starving. They could keep their chins as high as possible, but it wouldn't give them food, it wouldn't free them from the tyranny of the Mage. Still, he was their prince, even if they believed he was dead, they still relied on him to do... *something*.

"Benny?" Razor tapped him with a swarm of children around him - when did they get there? The kids all looked at him expectantly.

"Oh! Yeah?"

"Do you want to come, Mister?" A little blonde girl tugged at the coat as she peered up at him with pleading eyes. "Pleeease?"

"Come? Where?" The kids all giggled and even Razor fought back a little grin of amusement at his cluelessness.

"To the forest! Mr Wolfy agreed to take us into the forest to find food!"

Now with the understanding of what was going on, Bennett perked up at the thought of adventure, as well as helping his people. He crouched down to the kids with a huge smile on his face. "Well of course! That sounds like loads of fun! But I don't know how to hunt, so do you think you can teach me?"

"Yeah! Yeah we can!"

"Great! Let's go then!"

With a child in each hand, they skipped into the forest with Razor leading the pack of children and Bennett. If he thought the forest was beautiful from the outside, the inside would prove that thought to be an understatement. To look at the dappled sunlight filtering through the leads was one thing, but to walk beneath them with the sunlight dancing across his arms as they brushed through the ferns and shrubs. The same sunlight that skimmed over him, completely illuminated the wings of those little fluttering bees and butterflies that he held so close to his heart. They sparkled and glimmered as they gently beat their wings to float effortlessly and become fluttering crystals of light in the air. Trees leaned their branches down to sweep their leaves across the heads of the taller hunters, dusting leaves across Razor's hair, as the hood that previously protected him, now protecting the Prince trailing behind with the kids at his side, their chatter accompanying that of the forest's.

"You gotta draw back the arrow," the little pink haired girl on his left drew back an arrow with her toy bow, "aim, then shoot! And that's how you hunt!"

"Wow! I might actually catch something with you teaching me!"

"Course you will! I'm the best hunting teacher in Mondstadt!" She planted her hands on her hips.

Up ahead, the Wolven Prince scanned the area, his ears turning to every sound he deemed worthy enough for further investigation. The same stoic look stayed plastered on his face, even as the little blonde girl let go of Bennett's hand and jumped onto his, lifting up her legs so she dangled there with her fit of giggles spreading to those behind. He barely leaned down from the weight of the child, only a little stumble from the surprise before he steadied himself.

"Mr Wolfy? Can we get some berries? I'm hungry!"

"Of course, you all brought your baskets, didn't you?" The kids all held up their baskets of various sizes with a cheer. "Well, let's find a berry bush."

"Yay!"

"How about that one over there?" Bennett pointed to one of the many bushes laden with berries that were scattered around the area. Some were sprinkled with pink berries, others with red or green, but the most numerous were the blue berries that clung to their clothes when they brushed past. The one he happened to point to was decorated with small berries, round in shape and coloured bright red, but he only earned giggles from the children.

"Silly Benny! Those berries are bad!"

"They're poisonous." Razor said bluntly as he put the little blonde girl on the ground. "Maybe you kids could teach him."

"Yeah, I've never really been outside the castle before, so-"

"You come from the castle?!" The blonde squealed with excitement. "Are there princes and princesses like in mum's stories!?"

"Of course there's a Prince! Don't you remember what my dad says?" The pink haired girl

deepened her voice. “There was a prince once, but no one’s seen him in years!”

“Well,” Bennett crouched down to them, “the King just keeps him inside the castle.”

“Have you met him?!”

“Is he as charming as the ones in the stories?!”

“What’s he like?” Razor joined the kids on the ground, the whole group settling down to listen to Bennett talk about the Mysterious Prince. Of course, with him *being* the Prince, he couldn’t fight the amused grin crawling across his face.

“Well, he loves stories, especially ones filled with adventure. Oh, and he’s got terribly bad luck, is kinda clumsy and has a habit of falling into the arms of handsome princes. And I’d say he’s fairly charming, wouldn’t you, Razor?”

While the kids begged for more information, Bennett’s eyes drifted over to the Wolven Prince, unsurprised to see a pale blush staining his cheeks, and a look of utter shock shattering his impassive expression. As his ears flicked back, he could only stammer in response to the new revelation.

“Have you met him too?” Now all eyes were on Razor, the kids eagerly waiting for an answer.

“I uh,” Bennett urged him forward with a nod, “yes, I-I have. He was - is, the sweetest Prince I’ve ever met.”

“Aw! Do you *like* him?”

He jumped to his feet as the pink hue in his cheeks only deepened. “Uhm, h-how about you go start on those berries?”

In a chorus of giggles and whispers, the kids scurried off to the berry bushes. As they started their picking, they glanced back so often that they were barely looking at what they were grabbing, most either missing or gathering handfuls of leaves instead.

But as Bennett turned to join them, he was pulled back with a pair of familiar arms wrapping around him. “Not you, *your highness*. We’re going sunsettia picking.”

His yelp of surprise echoed through the trees as Razor effortlessly picked him up and sat him atop his shoulder as if he were merely a bird, and the Wolven Prince’s small grin didn’t go unseen. With the added height, Bennett easily reached the sunsettia’s in the nearby trees, though they were out of earshot of the gaggle of giggling children.

“So, you’re a Prince...”

“Yep!”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, I’m not really a prince anymore, besides,” he looked down to meet his eyes, the red and green of their eyes complimenting each other as much as the fruit did to the tree, “would you have looked at me differently if I had?”

Words that floated between them were never exchanged, an answer never received. Any reply he could come up with was quickly stolen by his heart and sealed within. Yet it didn’t matter, they weren’t needed. The Prince atop his shoulder returned to the task at hand with a soft smile, not a single speck of sorrow to stain it. Glowing as softly as the moon, and bringing as much joy as the sun, Razor would gladly take that smile over the life-giving rays of those far above. Now, the title didn’t matter, Prince or not, Bennett’s smile would have his heart dancing around in his chest just as it had done before, and just as it was doing now.

Time seemed to slow with the steps of his dancing heart, yet the basket in Bennett’s hands still filled quickly. His gaze soon returned to Razor and time caught up with them for mere seconds before it slowed once more. Red and green both resembled gemstones in the most beautiful way neither of them could find the right words to describe. Ever so enriching. Ever so alluring. Ever so perfect. Not a single word did them justice in the eyes of the other. As only for each other did they shine so brightly, the universe working to rightly position the sunlight through the trees and onto them.

But even with time on their side, the moment couldn’t last, its departure as fleeting as its arrival. A sunsettia freed itself from the tree and dropped right onto Bennett’s head - by some miracle landing in the basket, but causing him to flinch out of the gaze. “Ow! Everytime...”

“Mr Wolfy? Benny?”

The little blonde girl by their feet got two hums of acknowledgement as Razor lifted the Prince off his shoulder and placed him firmly back on the ground.

“Uhm...are...are you in love?”

A single question forced heat to rush to their cheeks, flushing a pale shade of red as both struggled to come up with an answer. A small duet of stammering ensued, with not a properly formed word to be heard, and accompanied by the giggles of the girl. Yet the universe was anything but satisfied, another sunsettia dropped from the tree, once again striking the same target; Bennett’s head. Now dropped from a greater height, it nearly knocked him over, his body lurching forward while his eyes were sent skyward, with Razor just in view. They were so wonderfully close, only a few measly inches of space daring to separate them, and one unaware he was holding the other. And oh how red they both turned as their eyes met once again. The feeling was ever so familiar, but still didn’t fail to make their breaths hitch in their throats, their hearts skip just a little bit faster.

“I think that’s a yes.” The pink haired girl giggled as she joined her friend’s side. “Just like your mum’s stories.”

“H-how about...we go hunting?” Razor’s suggestion got a chorus of cheers.

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Slinking through the undergrowth like a true wolf, the Wolven Prince made quick work of the hunt - dashing after prey on all fours, with strength powerful enough to take down the forest boars he’d sniffed out moments before. In little less than an hour, they had three boars in tow on their way back, as well as the children’s baskets full of berries, and a basket piled high with sunsettias.

“Come on, let’s go take this to the butcher.” Razor split off with the pink haired girl, dragging along their kill as the rest of the group continued to the village square.

“Mum! Mum look! Mr Wolfy and Benny took us hunting!”

“That’s wonderful, sweetheart! What did you find?”

“We got lots of berries! And Mr Wolfy caught boars!”

With a fond smile, Bennett drew his eyes away to keep up his disguise as mother and daughter caught up. He turned to handing out the fruit to those who approached. From just a few glances, he knew they were as close as he and his father were once upon a time, the laughter of the two just as joyful as those happy memories buried deep in his mind. His mind drifted away from the fruit he handed out, and towards those memories that felt more like dreams; so distant but so comforting. Running through the halls on little adventures stacked high with imaginary danger, his father looking at him for their next move. Playing in the village with the other children, as a friend and not a royal. Even hiding behind his dad’s legs while he was on official business, brought a solemn smile to his face as they played through his head like a bedtime story.

“Thank you, young man.” An old man held his hand, and the sunsettia, in both of his. “Thank you.”

“It’s...it’s the least I can do, though I wish I could help more.”

“A helping hand can only do so much. This is all we need.”

“But-”

“A few words of advice for you; the littlest bee may make the least honey, but it still helps the hive, no matter how small its contribution. The littlest deeds still have an impact, young one, and sometimes they’re bigger than they seem.” With that, he said nothing more, merely chuckling as he took the sunsettia with a thankful nod, then hobbled away with the Prince’s eyes glued to his back, until they were blocked by the next person stepping up to take the next fruit.

“Benny! We handed out all the berries!” A collection of empty baskets were held up to him, with proud smiles peeking out from beneath them.

“Great! Would you like to help me hand these out?”

“Yeah!” He crouched down to them and shared the fruit out between the kids, each one running off to take them around the village.

As the word - and the food - spread throughout the people, the crowd in the square grew quickly. Most hoped to meet the mysterious, but ever so kind, stranger and thank him themselves, while others had simply been drawn in by the commotion. Of course, it wasn't long before Razor returned and had to weave his way through. He made himself known by gently slipping his hand into Bennett's, exchanging smiles with him when he turned.

"Hi."

"Hey."

"See mum!? I told you they were from the story!" The little girl earned a chorus of chuckles while her mother lifted her up.

"Indeed they are." She gave the princes a fond smile, as their cheeks flushed pink.

But all of their heads were soon turned to the looming walls of the castle gates as they creaked open, the thundering of readying hooves emerging before the carriage did. Instantly, the streets emptied themselves. Doors closed to shield the people from the chill that was approaching. Fearful silence hunted the laughter, chasing it into the shadows and alleys. A bitterly cold mist crept over the mud of the street, it clung to the ankles of the Princes as they sprinted for the safety of the forest. Seconds after they ducked into a bush, the carriage passed them, a sheen of frost biting at their arms and noses.

"That was close..." Bennett hauled himself to his feet. "I should go back."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Yeah, while I can get in unseen."

And so they set off towards the castle, down the forest path side by side. The walk back was full of lively chatter about the day, and about a possible new adventure. By the time they reached the wall, so many adventures had merely been talked about that excitement fluttered around them like butterflies, awaiting the day these may one day happen. Razor lifted him up onto the top of the wall.

"I'll be back tomorrow, for another adventure."

“I can’t wait.” With a last goodbye smile, Bennett climbed - well, toppled off the wall into the yard. He hummed as he skipped over to the well to retrieve the lost bucket. Despite the bumps and flaws, the day had been so wonderful it had him lost in thought, completely lost to the castle. His mind was still in the forest, under the leaves with no walls to stop him, nothing to stand in his way. Out there, he could be free, to roam, to adventure, to help those who relied on him.

Not only that but, what would the next adventure hold? He pulled the coat further around himself as he leaned down to fish out the bucket, already thinking of the endless possibilities of tomorrow. The newfound freedom brought a bright smile along with the rush of what could come next.

But as much as he wished to stay in his dream of freedom, he was pulled out of it by the armoured hand of a Shadowy Knight grasping his arm.

“H-hey-mmhmph!” The other hand covered his mouth before he could even think to fight back. Yet even when he did, the Knight barely reacted, merely shaking him and regaining its grasp when he was nearly free.

Despite the steady flow of people working, Bennett was dragged through the halls to the throne room without being seen, or heard. His muffled calls were marked up to be anything except what they truly were; a cry for help. After he was pushed and sent stumbling in, the doors slammed closed, locks clicking ominously.

“How...regretful.”

His head snapped around to stare in horror at the Abyss Mage, sitting on the icy throne with his father’s crown atop its head. It too was coated and warped by ice, now resembling thorns defending the head that wore it. But it was supposed to be out, in the carriage that gave him the all clear to go home. How come it was here?

Then it dawned on him, hitting him like a tonne of bricks. His face and heart sank. He’d been tricked.

“I was hoping to give you some dignity in a formal execution,” its voice screeched with an unnervingly calm tone, “but as you *insist* on breaking my rules, I’m going to revoke that privilege.”

At that moment, Bennett just knew the Mage was grinning beneath its mask, revelling in the fear in

his eyes, savouring the helplessness radiating from him. It rose from its stolen throne to circle him as every attempt to back away failed.

“Fortunately for you, I’ve already chosen your end.”

With a click of its claw-like fingers, a door swung open. In a hopeless attempt to escape, he sprinted towards it as fast as he could. But his efforts only landed him in the grasp of the Mage’s tool.

“I’m sure you met Draff on your little outing today. Or at least, he saw you. He’s my best hunter and ever so loyal. I’m sure you’ll get along swimmingly. Draff, you’ll be taking the Prince on another little trip into the forest.”

“Yes your majesty.”

Struggling proved useless, calling for help would most likely wield the same result, yet still he continued to fight against the hunter holding him. He desperately tried to tear his arms from the hands of the man in feeble defiance. The Mage appearing in front of him made him freeze in fear, breaths shaking.

“Aren’t you happy? I’m giving you another chance to leave the castle grounds. Another little adventure for you! Only this time, you won’t be coming back. Isn’t it wonderful?!?”

“Wha-why are you- you doing this? I’m no...I’m no threat to you!” Fear made his whole body tremble, shaking away any ounce of bravery he summoned.

“Your very existence fills others with...hope,” it shivered in disgust. “Just look at the servants, they work not just for their lives, but for yours as well, hoping, wishing, *praying* that one day, if they just keep you alive and keep hoping, you’ll save them from me. They hope that the little Prince will stand up, the one who does nothing but hide behind others. The one who can’t even protect himself, even now.”

Clawed hands forced him to look into the eyes of the mask, digging into his chin. “The one who’s too afraid to even look at me. They’re waiting for the day you find a speck of courage to pick up a sword and drive it through. My. *Heart* .” With every syllable it tapped his chest as if it were merely glass sheltering his heart, the fear effortlessly rooting into it.

“Please-”

“That, is why I’m doing this. Why you have to die, like you should’ve *long* ago.”

His eyes stung with the threat of tears. Crying would only make things worse, it would open the door for even more fear, more taunts to be thrown his way. So he choked them down, forcing them back into hiding as he just stared in terror, words taken and crushed before his eyes.

“Now, off you go.” With a mere flick of its hand, the Mage sentenced him to his fate. As he was roughly dragged by the hunter, Bennett thrashed with all his might, breaking free for a feeble few seconds before he was caught again. “Oh and Draff? Leave his body where his little wolf friend can find it. I’ll enjoy watching his heart break.”

“Yes your-”

“N-no! No! Leave him out of this! Please! He has nothing to do with any of this!”

“Well look who found some courage outside,” it looked him up at down, revelling in his pitiful struggle, “pathetic as it may be, it certainly is courage. But I think you forget, *you’re* the one who got him involved in this in the first place.”

“I-”

“Bye bye now, enjoy your trip.” Those words. Those final, casual words sealed his fate. Words that were said everyday by families separating for months, or just a few days, were used to send him to his death.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Okay so I know this is a fairytale but, we have more warnings!

- Attempted murder
- Threat

Things get more wholesome from here I promise :D

By the time they reached a secluded spot far from the castle walls, the sun had completely set, yet the forest's beauty didn't leave with the golden light, merely shifting to silver. Dappled over whatever it touched, the moonlight reached the undergrowth in dim, gentle beams, intent on barely lighting the paths of those that claimed the night as their own. Fireflies danced in the air, taking the place of their daytime counterparts; butterflies, visiting the same flowers that now looked as though they had been crafted from glass. Petals radiated beauty with the night light giving them a gentle glow.

Though the scenery had barely changed, it was far too quiet. No birds singing their songs, no rustling of leaves, nor was there the background noise of the far off village. The silence was only broken by the heavy footsteps of the hunter, and the irregular ones of his prisoner.

Bennett hadn't said a word the entire walk, eyes fixed on the floor in outward hopelessness. But inwardly, the cogs turned a mile a minute to find a way out. It was tricky with his hands tied behind him, and a dagger resting against his back. Tricky, but *possible*.

"Stop. This is far enough."

As soon as the tip of the dagger left his back, he was off. Sprinting through the trees as fast as his legs could manage.

"Hey!" Draff's voice got closer, carried by his footsteps. "Get back here!"

Unfamiliar with the forest, Bennett had no idea where he was running, just away. Maybe he'd come across someone who could help him, or lose the hunter hot on his trail, or find somewhere to hide. All the ways looked the same, all dark with an endless barrier of trees, others more forgiving than some, but still nearly impossible to navigate. He ducked behind a tree to catch his breath, panickedly looking around to find any sign of help.

But as soon as he stopped, it was clear that was the worst thing he could do. Seconds later, the hunter cornered his prey. Light flashed in his eyes as the blade caught the moonlight, rising high above him. Fear tried to freeze him, but his legs had other ideas. He tried to run again, only pulled back by the hunter.

With Bennett pressed against the tree, the dagger had free reign to stare him down and turn his own eyes turned against him, warping them into yet another indirect tool of his tormentor.

“You,” Draff’s hands shook before he let go with both, and the blade fell to the ground, “I...I can’t do this...Thank you.”

The hunter dropped into a bow, consequently sending a look of surprise across Bennett’s face. “I... you uhm - you’re not going...to ki- to kill me?”

“No...you’re the reason my daughter ate today, I can’t- I’m sorry I scared you,” at Draff’s signal, the Prince turned around and watched from over his shoulder as his hands were freed, “as an apology, and a thank you, I can help you.”

“How?”

“There’s a small town by the stream, if you go there, you’ll be safe.”

Bennett looked out at the forest, the winding, unclear paths staring back at him. “I- I can’t...how can I, I trust you?”

“Trusting me is up to you, I can only express my gratitude and hope you believe me. There are people in that town who can protect you. Just follow the stream and you’ll be safe.”

“Just follow the stream...” He echoed in a whisper, too busy looking for the stream to notice the hunter’s silent departure until he was gone. But, there was no stream in sight, nor a trickle of running water to be heard. There was just forest as far as the eye could see, unbroken and filled with the unknown.

Still, Bennett set off, opting to head directly away from the castle, rather than risk stumbling too

close. He wandered and wandered, the hours passing by without telling him. At night, the forest all looked the same, so much so that he questioned whether he was even going anywhere more than once. Yet he knew he was moving, his aching feet told him that much.

Each tree that he passed was further from danger, but also from home. He got further and further away from his people, Adelinde, Huffman, and his dad's memories. Each step took him away from the halls of his childhood and the people he loved.

Step after step he knew he had to keep going no matter how tired he got, or how much his legs begged him to stop. At last he came across a river, rushing along with violent speed. One side - the side he was stood on - was overgrown with bushes and trees, while the other was the complete opposite. No doubt he'd have to cross to avoid losing the river, fortunately there was a fallen tree just up ahead, rather thin, a bit rotten and a little precarious as it may be, it was still a way across. So he shuffled along it, on his hands and knees as an extra precaution should he trip on a branch, or his own feet, or even just the air-

Crrck! Splash!

The tree breaking beneath him sent him hurtling into the water below. The harsh current tossed him around like a ragdoll, easily overpowering his attempts to fight and swim to the safety of the shore. He thrashed around trying to stay afloat, the escape to land now impossible as he was swept downstream into the unknown.

~

From atop the wall, he had a full view of the yard, including the well and even the door to the castle kitchens. Yet Razor couldn't see who he came for: Bennett. Still, they hadn't agreed on a time so he'd just have to wait for him, so he hopped off the wall to sit on the edge of the well. He gently hummed to himself, twirling the well rope around in his hands, smiling when he realised the soft tune was the same one Bennett usually hummed while he was working.

"Well," the voice chuckled as he spun around in surprise, "this is a surprise."

"Oh, good morning Your Majesty." Razor stumbled to his feet and into a bow.

"Morning. Now, I don't recall us having a meeting today, might you be here for someone else?"

“I...yes actually, I’m here to see uh, Bennett.”

“I see, I see.” The King gave him a knowing smile. “Well, I’m afraid I haven’t seen him today. Though I’m curious as to why you’re looking for him.”

“I agreed to meet him here again so we could go-” The King raised an eyebrow, prompting Razor to switch his story, “go...to the...well, again.”

“Well, you’re welcome to look for him inside, I’m sure he’s somewhere. You might even want to check the forest,” he chuckled, “I can never keep that boy inside.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

With a bow, Razor set off for the door to the kitchen, propping the door open with his foot as he turned back to the King with a silent offer of heading inside with him. But the King shook his head and smiled, so Razor headed inside, politely greeting the staff scurrying around the kitchen.

And as the door closed and the noises of the kitchen faded away, the outward appearance of Cyrus melted away into the creature of the abyss grinning beneath its mask. “Is it done?”

Draff stepped out from where he’d been silently lurking in the shadows, just waiting for the Wolveen Prince to leave. “Yes Your Majesty...”

“Finally that nuisance is gone, the kingdom is truly mine!” The Mage’s screeching laugh of victory echoed around the yard, unheard by those inside.

~

“Morning,” Razor hovered by the door of the busy kitchen, having managed to grab the attention of someone washing dishes, “could you point me in the direction of um...Adeline?”

“Adelinde? She’s over there.” Bubbles clung to their hand as they brought it out of the soapy water to point her out.

“Thank you.” He weaved through the kitchen in an attempt to stay out of the way, stepping out of the way of hot pots and pans being carried around at a rapid pace. Steam was constantly rising from one of the many pots on the stovetops, swirling through the air until it dispersed gracefully. The smell was divine, a mixture of sweet and savoury, with the overpowering scent of cooking meat. Razor ducked past another hot pan being carried who knows where, before he finally reached her side.

“Excuse me, Miss Adelinde?”

She turned to him with a sweet, almost motherly smile, but it carried an air of worry, breaking through her attempts to hide it. “Oh hello there Razor, what can I help you with?”

“Have you seen Bennett?”

At those words, she gently guided him aside and out of the way of the rushing kitchen staff. “I’m afraid I haven’t, but Huffman’s searching the castle so I’m sure he’ll find him-”

“Adelinde!” The doors burst open and in rushed Huffman, squeezing his way through the room with a maid trailing behind him. “Tell her *exactly* what you told me.”

“Last night, I was getting ready for bed and I was really tired from work, so my back was aching-”

“I meant the other bit, about Bennett.”

Now the maid had Razor’s attention, made clear by his step forward and ears flicking to face her.

“Oh, right, well, I looked over at the window and saw him being taken into the forest by Draff.”

“Does that mean-” Tears brimmed in Adelinde’s eyes, the thoughts running through her head sent her stumbling into a chair.

“I fear so...”

“What...what does that mean?” The Wolven Prince looked between the two - the maid having gone back to work - repeatedly.

“It means...Bennett was taken to the forest to - to be ki...kil-killed.”

“No he - he can’t be...he’s not!” For a moment, Razor thought he’d need a chair to fall back in too, but shock and horror was easily overwhelmed by confusion. “But - but why would - why would he be killed?”

“Because the Mage has been waiting for an opportunity too...” Trying to contain his own grief, Huffman turned to console Adelinde, rubbing her shoulder, having someone fetch a glass of water, anything to keep his emotions buried.

“Mage? What are-”

“The creature that took over the kingdom after the death of the King.”

“But...” Razor flopped back into a second chair, horror flooding his eyes and mind. “I’ve been talking with him. With the...King. He couldn’t be- he couldn’t be dead-”

“You couldn’t have, he’s...he died years ago- no...” He whispered, the realisation sending a tremor through his hands. “That thing...it- it can shapeshift...”

“It...it tricked me and- and now- I was...I was going to- ”

Somewhere, Razor’s ears pricked up at the mention of a familiar name, buried beneath the sounds of the kitchen and his own swirling emotions. His eyes followed his ears, stalking through the rushing people and clouds of rising steam until they stopped on two men by the door, one with a bow on his back, while the other inspected a cut of meat.

“Ah thank you Draff, it looks as good as always!”

Anger pulled him to his feet and across to them, shoving his way through as he slipped his greatsword off of his back and into his hands. As a show of strength, the blade was swung over to his other side, a warning to the hunter he'd caught the attention of.

"Did you kill him?"

"What- what're you," he gulped, "talking about?"

"You heard me." A low growl rumbled at the back of his throat, threatening to surface into more than just intimidating words - never Razor's specialty to begin with, actions on the other hand came naturally to him. Ears pointed right at his prey, eyes narrowed with his nose scrunched and lips parted enough to show just how sharp, *deadly* sharp, his fangs were.

The blade swung through the air once again, mere inches from Draff's neck.

"Woah, woah there! You don't have to hurt me!" He threw his hands up in surrender. The Prince, wielding a weapon he couldn't even hope to lift, struck fear right into his core.

"Answer the question."

"I don't know who or what you're talking about!"

"Bennett." A grin pulled at the corner of his mouth, part of him revelled in the fear that guaranteed an honest answer.

"Uhm- uh who-"

"You know *exactly* who he is. Did. You. *Kill . Him ?*"

"I told him to run!" He blurted out, panicked breaths coming afterwards. "I took him into the forest and let him go!"

"Where?" By now, he'd been joined by Huffman and Adelinde, only acknowledged by Razor

thanks to the sword appearing next to him.

“I told him to follow the stream! To the town!-”

Before Draff could even finish, Razor was out the door, into the yard and already climbing back onto the wall, with Adelinde and Huffman hot on his tail. “Wait! If he made it to the town, isn’t he safe?!”

“The stream doesn’t lead to the town! If he follows it, it’ll take him into Wolvendom, and the gate guards don’t take kindly to visitors, *especially* humans.” Once on top of the wall, a hand held him by the wrist, time ticking away without a care for any of their lives.

“But aren’t you their Prince?!”

“I am, but they won’t know who he is. Which is why I have to leave now!”

Huffman hoisted himself up onto the wall. “Then I’m coming.”

“I don’t have time-”

“To argue. Now lead the way.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Back again! I'm really glad people are enjoying this because it's one of my favourite projects, especially now that I've added the drawings (ooo surprise for at the very end :D)

Warnings:

- Mention/small description of injury (specifically broken wrist)

Deep in the forest, where the snow and eyes of the Abyss Mage didn't reach, lay a quaint cottage at the edge of the river. Nestled among the trees, the smoking chimney was all that could be seen from above, the dull blue tiles of the roof hidden by the leaves above. With a water wheel steadily turning and providing power, and the gardens of various fruits and vegetables, the little cottage mostly provided everything the inhabitants could need.

Inside, said inhabitants - seven magical dwarves - lay resting, enjoying the calls of birds outside as some savoured today's lie in, tucked into the warmth of their beds. Until a falcon screeched as she glided in through the open window, perching on the end of the bed that had a mop of red hair sprawled across the pillow. She screeched again and again, her wings flapping in desperation.

"Hngh...Diluc shut your bird up..."

"*Shhhh* Nocta, not now...it's too early..." Diluc wriggled further into the warmth of his bed, only to be drawn out of it by more screeching.

"Alright," he yawned, "what's the matter with you?"

Nocta hopped from perch to perch towards the window, her cries constantly ringing around the room, along with the sound of her violently flapping wings..

On the other side of the room, groans of waking confusion and a lot of shuffling came from one of the beds. "Wha- whaa?"

"Morning Amber, sorry about the...the noise." Diluc rubbed the last bits of sleep from his eyes and

let the falcon hop onto his arm, rubbing under her beak. “What’s the matter, hm?”

“It’s fine, I needed to get up anyway!” Amber hopped out of bed, preceded by Eula rising from the bed next to hers. “Is everyone else up?”

“I think so,” there was another groan from the last occupied bed, “except Kaeya.”

Nocta resumed her screeching, even more desperate and loud than before. Screeching with all her might with no sign of stopping, even as the final dwarf to rise, tumbled out of bed with a *thump*. “*OW!* Urgh, for crying out loud, she’s trying to tell you something!”

“Perhaps it is about the boy in the river.” Albedo’s appearance in the doorway startled them, his ability to seemingly materialise out of nowhere still a mystery to them.

“I’m sorry *what?*” Their morning brains hadn’t quite kicked into gear enough to process the understandably confusing sentence, which resulted in some very interesting stares being aimed at Albedo. Some shocked, some mildly concerned, but nearly all with numerous silent questions, while Kaeya simply had ‘what’ plastered over his face.

“The boy, in the river. Jean and Noelle are handling-” the force of four people running past him to get to the door nearly knocked poor Albedo over, grabbing onto the doorframe to save himself from tumbling down the stairs behind him, “it...”

Of course, four people trying all to squeeze through had never ended well before. So in an unceremonious pile of chaos and limbs, they finally burst through the front door and promptly fell over each other. Albedo was the only one to come out unscathed as he’d trailed behind, now merely stepping over the mess of limbs on the grass.

Even further outside, Noelle and Jean were leaning out over the river as they could, holding onto whatever was sturdy enough to let them. Their eyes were focused further down the river, on the water wheel beside the house. Thankfully the current wasn’t too strong today, because sure enough, caught between some rocks and the frame of the wheel, was a boy.

From where they were standing, it was impossible to tell if he’d lost consciousness or if he was just barely clinging to it. But either way, it was only a matter of time before the current picked up and washed him away to who knows where - with survival not guaranteed.

“Finally! Albedo, what took you so long?”

“Apologies, I stopped to put the kettle on.”

“You *what*?! ”

“I thought he’d like a cup of tea when we get him out.”

“Why that’s very considerate Albedo,” Noelle, polite as always, pulled herself back up and away from the river, “but we do need to get him out first.”

“Woah!” Amber bounded over to the river and leaned over the edge to peer at the boy. “There really *is* a boy in the river! I thought Albedo was joking to get us up!”

“Amber, we both know I would not joke about such things.”

“How’d he get there?”

“It’s hard to say, but I came out to hang up the washing and there he was. But before we do anything else,” with a plan now in mind, Jean took charge of the situation, looking over at those still on the ground, “we need everyone ready and on-hand to help.”

“I’d love to provide my assistance,” Kaeya strained to wriggle out from his brother, “but I’m a *little* stuck at the moment.”

“Likewise.” Diluc looked up at Eula, sandwiched between the two.

“Alright, alright, I’m moving.”

Once everyone was on their feet, they all fell silent to listen to Jean. “Right, Albedo, Noelle, see if you can slow down the current with rocks, we don’t want anyone else getting swept away. Amber, go fetch some blankets, we’ll be ready on the shore with them.”

“On it!” Quick as a hare, she disappeared inside.

“Eula, Kaeya, work on getting to him, and don’t freeze him. Diluc, go inside and make the tea. Is everyone clear?”

“Yes ma’am!”

“Wha-”

“Good!”

“But-”

As predicted, Diluc’s confused protests were completely ignored as everyone split off and got to work, so he simply headed inside towards the kitchen, passing Amber on her way out with an armful of blankets and towels.

Water was thrown into the air as rocks were conjured and dropped to the bottom of the river. With both Noelle and Albedo working quickly, the rocks soon built up to resemble a dam, veins of glowing gold acting as a glue.

Kaeya took the first steps onto the river, platforms of ice crystalised beneath his feet like stepping stones, only washed away once he’d stepped off. He sauntered over, unbothered by the stilts of ice wobbling beneath him - until he was nearly knocked off as another rock was sent into the water further up the river. Suddenly his steps were very careful, only making him *more* aware of the shaking ice. So now he resembled a fawn taking its first steps, admittedly not as graceful as he’d like.

While to his left, Eula practically waltzed over. Seconds after she hopped off her ice stepping stones, they were stolen by the water. As she was quick and light on her feet, she made the task look effortless, making a sturdy platform of ice as she waited for Kaeya near the boy.

“Show off.”

Slowly but surely, he reached the boy, standing on the platform of ice as it expanded to make room for the boy.

“Is he breathing?!” Jean called over, watching anxiously.

“Yeah! He’s definitely breathing!” Eula called back as Kaeya worked on freeing his wrist from where the current had lodged it between the rocks and the frame. After a little wriggling, he got his wrist free, a hideously swollen bruise making itself known.

“Oh gods, that’s definitely broken.” Fortunately, he wasn’t stuck underwater, so it was easy to carefully slide the boy onto the sheet of ice, all the while finding little cuts and bruises obviously from the river throwing him around.

“Alright, let’s get him back on dry land.”

Everyone on the shore watched anxiously - except Diluc who was grumpily watching water boil - as the boy was carefully carried across a bridge of ice. Each step was precarious as the ice cracked and wobbled from the weight of the people, and the water below it, but with a little more magic, it was quickly stabilised. Kaeya carried the boy on his back, mindful of his wrist.

Once they reached the shore, he was laid to rest on a blanket with another one over him. The stone wall and the ice were surrendered to the river as the dwarves gathered around him.

“What do you think he was doing out there?”

“Probably got washed down from somewhere.” Diluc returned with a cup of tea in hand, steam rising from it.

“Yeah but surely someone would’ve noticed he fell in? If he was travelling with someone...”

“I doubt that,” Jean knelt down to him and took a closer look at his wrist, “otherwise they would’ve probably followed along on the shore.”

A gust of wind blew over them, carrying the seeds of dandelions with it. As her hand glowed a soft turquoise, the wind rushed to her and swirled around the boy's wrist beneath her hovering hand. The swelling died down, and by the time the wind and light faded, his wrist looked as though it had never been broken.

"Let's get him inside where it's warmer, we can finish healing upstairs."

Safely carrying someone up the fairly narrow staircase ended up not being as hard as expected, it was when they got to the top of the stairs that they ran into a problem: the door was closed. Now with Eula and Noelle holding the boy at the top of the staircase, and the others at the bottom, a lot of shuffling ensued as the stairs barely allowed Amber to shimmy past and open the door.

Still, they made it in and tucked the boy into the nearest bed, a little curled up and squished but otherwise fairly comfortable. At the foot of the bed, the dwarves watched as Noelle and Jean carefully healed the boy as best they could, only leaving a few scars or bruises. Miraculously, he hadn't seemed to have inhaled any water, or had coughed it up beforehand. So when they were done, they were all left to look at the boy; short white hair and fairly freckled, the cold had turned his cheeks and the tips of his ears and nose a pale pink.

"Who do you think he is?" Finally breaking the silence, Amber peered at the boy, her curiosity always the first to be piqued.

"We can only wait until he wakes up to know."

"I'm sure it won't take long. How about I cook up some breakfast for us all in the meantime?"

"Great idea Noelle!"

Splitting off into two different conversations, they made their way to the top of the stairs, only turning back when Kaeya's voice was missing from the group to see he was still by the bedside.

"Kaeya? You coming?"

"I believe one of us staying behind would be best, he'll probably be quite confused when he wakes. Besides, he looks...a bit familiar." He didn't move his eye from the boy as he took a seat on the bed next to his own.

“Alright, I’ll bring up some breakfast for you.”

“Thanks Luc.”

~

In a matter of hours, breakfast was over and it was nearing lunch, the dwarves sat around the table with Noelle humming and cooking behind them. Concern for the boy filled the air, as there had been no movement nor sounds upstairs other than the ones that were obviously Kaeya. The tapping of Jean’s foot was matched by Diluc’s tapping on the table, both trying to mask their worry for the boy upstairs. Amber had taken to helping Noelle to stop herself from going upstairs for the third time in an hour.

“I’m sure he’ll be alright,” Noelle set the table around them, reassuring them despite them not voicing the need, “we just have to be patient.”

“Yeah...you’re right.”

“I’m sure everything will be fine-”

“ WOAH! HEY HEYHEY! ”

Kaeya’s cry sent them unceremoniously bolting up the stairs, pushing and squeezing through the door before they burst into the bedroom.

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Kaeya - on the receiving end of his own sword - had his hands outstretched in surrender. On the other end of the sword, the boy was sitting up in the bed with an equal mix of confusion and fear plastered on his face, “why don’t you put the sword down, and we can talk this through? ”

“Where- no, no, I am *not* putting this down until you tell me *where* I am, *who* you are and-” he froze as the other dwarves burst in, the sword now pointed at them, “and who *they* are!”

“Look, it’s okay, I’m Kaeya, and these are my friends, Jean, Noelle, Amber, Eula, Albedo, and that’s my brother Diluc.” The boy looked between the dwarves as they all gave a little wave in turn, with the friendliest smiles they could manage. Then he turned back to Kaeya with the sword understandably shaking in his hands. “We found you in the river and brought you inside. Now, I promise you, you’re not in any danger. Now just put the sword down.”

He swallowed nervously as he shook his head. “One- one more...are you working for a- an Abyss Mage?”

“Never.”

“And that goes for *all* of you?”

Their group nod was followed by a sigh of relief as the boy drew his knees up to hug them, visibly relaxing. His arm fell limp with the sword dangling off the bed as if he could no longer hold it properly. “I’m sorry I-I don’t even know how to use this thing, it’s just...I had a long night and-and I had to be sure...”

“Yeah, yeah that’s clear uh...” Cautiously, Kaeya edged closer with empty hands outstretched.
“Can I have it back? Before someone gets hurt.”

“Oh, yeah. Here, uh, sorry again.”

Once the sword was in his hand, Kaeya put it back in the sheath leaning over in his corner, as everyone gathered around the end of the bed.

“It’s alright.”

“After all, ending up in a river can be quite stressful.” Albedo took to making notes as if the boy were merely something for him to study, though he flinched slightly at the unexpected hand on his forehead checking his temperature.

“Yeah um...” With a little unnecessary help and a small stumble where the dwarves were sure he’d collapse, the boy rose out of the bed. “Oh! I haven’t thanked you for pulling me out of the river.”

Before they could voice their feeble protests, the boy dropped into a bow, with every step as regal as his smile was grateful. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome...” They were a little hesitant as the overall shock was only just starting to calm. But it almost hid the whisper Eula sent in Amber’s direction. “His etiquette is exquisite, almost to a royal standard!”

“I’m sorry but,” Noelle stepped forward, “if you wouldn’t mind, could you tell us your name please?”

“Oh! Yeah, of course, I probably should’ve led with that actually. It’s Bennett.”

“Bennett...doesn’t he sound familiar to you?” Kaeya looked between Jean and Diluc, the name ringing a faint bell in all of their minds.

“Yeah...you wouldn’t happen to be from Mondstadt, would you?”

“I am.” Bennett watched them with a knowing, almost mischievous smile as he watched them whisper in two little separate groups - with Albedo whispering to himself more than anyone who was unfortunate enough to listen in on his rapidfire logic making leaps and bounds until he wasn’t even on the right subject, either having figured it out or completely lost - before they all turned back to him.

“Okay so that’s narrowed it down...”

“Are you...nobility?”

“Of course he is, did you see that bow?!” Eula chimed in.

“Weeelll, in a sense...”

“You’re having way too much fun with this.” Diluc raised an eyebrow, only earning an amused shrug from him in return, while Kaeya began to pace.

“I know I recognise you from somewhere! I just don’t know-”

“He’s the prince.” Albedo said matter-of-factly, not glancing up from the sketch he’d begun. Only when the room went quiet did it prompt him to look up. “Is it...not obvious?”

“No!”

“Oh.”

“Wait...does that mean we...” As she thought, Amber’s face dropped into one of fear. “Does that mean we kidnapped a prince?!”

“Did we?! Oh I do apologize!” Noelle joined the mild panic, her apology extending into a rapid series of ‘sorry’s.

“No, no, it’s okay, you actually saved me, remember?”

“Exactly, we pulled him out of a river.” Diluc refrained from rolling his eyes, settling on crossing his arms instead. “Which does bring up the question; what *were* you doing in there anyway?”

“Weellll,” he rubbed the back of his neck with an awkward smile, “I tried...I tried to cross over a fallen tree last night and it...it broke.”

“What was the Prince of Mondstadt doing trying to cross a river like that?” Sensing there was a tale as the answer, the dwarves - now with Amber and Noelle calmed - sat down on the various beds around him, with Bennett following suit.

“It’s a *very* long story...”

“Well, lunch isn’t going anywhere. Besides, this feels like it’ll be interesting.” Kaeya leaned back to listen.

“Well...” And so began the tale of how the kingdom fell into ruin, how he met the Wolveen Prince and how he was left in the forest. Phrased just like one of the stories he was told about his father, Bennett’s story had the dwarves captivated, their attention glued to him. Admittedly, he spent a little *too* long talking about Razor, to the point where they were all smirking and smiling at each other knowingly, with even Diluc’s usually stoic face cracking into a small grin. “...he told me to follow the stream but I couldn’t find see, and eventually I found the river and...I guess we all know where it went from there.”

“That’s...”

“...quite a tale.” Albedo - with his sketch long forgotten - shot a sceptical look at the others. “Abyss Mages aren’t known to attack large settlements, let alone whole kingdoms. Are you certain it was one?”

“I think after all these years I’d know if it was or not.”

The redhead chimed in, surprising the whole group enough to turn to him. “I think I’ve seen it. Thought it was a puppet for a show.”

“A puppet?”

“There was some kind of festival on, besides I was a kid.”

Bennett leaned forward with his curiosity piqued. “You’ve been to Mondstadt?” Diluc nodded. “Is it far from here?”

“Not as far as you should hope if that Mage is after you.”

“That hunter would probably be killed if he said he let me go, so I doubt it would come looking for me.”

“I think,” Jean finally spoke up, “we need to talk, just a moment, uh, your highness.”

“Just Bennett is fine!” He called after them with a smile as they shuffled away, then started to take

in his surroundings a bit more. Seven small beds crammed into the room, each with their own side table, with little walkway between them. The covers on each bed were different, in both colour and how they were laid out, some were messily thrown aside, others neatly made, one was even practically falling off the bed. What lay on the side tables differed for each bed too, a pile of books on one, an empty wine bottle on the other, a falcon sat atop a perch lay on the one next to the bed he was sat on.

“Well hello there.” He spoke softly, holding his hand out in offering to the falcon, and she hopped onto his hand rather than just enjoy the strokes he was offering. Her claws dug right through his sleeve and into his wrist, but he ignored the gradually dulling pain and pampered the falcon.

Though that did bring up some questions, as he remembered pain shooting through his wrist during the initial fall, and then it *hurt* like there was nothing that could stop it. Of course his main focus was trying to get to shore so he didn’t really care at the time, but now...his wrist was completely fine. As a matter of fact, he was miraculously unharmed, barely even a scratch. He looked over at the dwarves in thought, but only being on the side of the room, he could hear their hushed conversation and quickly got distracted, accidentally listening in while gently petting the falcon.

“What do you suppose we do? If the Mage comes here-”

“We’ll fight it, we’ve fought them before.”

“Not while having to protect someone-”

“It’ll be fine! There’s only one! And there’s seven of us!”

“One strong enough to take over an *entire* kingdom. We can’t risk it finding him. Let alone it finding him *here* !”

“It thinks he’s dead, who would go looking for a dead prince?”

“But he’s *not* dead.”

“And how would it know that?”

“I could always go scout it out and see if anyone’s gone out looking?”

“Good idea Amber. Alright, we’ll keep him until we confirm no one’s looking for him. If they are, he has to go, it’s the safest option-”

“We could always teach him to fight.”

“What kind of an idea is that, Kaeya?”

“A good one.” Kaeya lifted his head from the huddle. “We can’t exactly kick him out and we can’t protect him. So we teach him to protect himself. Easy.”

“You’re teaching him then, since it’s your idea.”

“Fine by me.”

They turned back as the room fell silent, apart from the Prince quietly fawning over the falcon.
“Aw, are you a pretty birdie? Yes you are.”

She lifted her head proudly as he rubbed just under her beak, choosing to ignore Diluc’s calling whistle in favour of the Prince.

“We’ve decided-”

“Nocta,” he sighed and whistled again, “c’m’here.”

Yet she did nothing but screech and turn away from him, which in turn sent giggles through the room.

“You aren’t mad at me for this morning, are you?”

“Can you...talk to animals? Is that like a magic thing? Are you all magical?” Bennett found himself under the falcon’s wing once she’d hopped onto his shoulder, giggling quietly at the argument between man and bird.

“No, he’s just a weirdo who *really* loves that bird.”

“Nocta come on, please forgive me?”

She turned her back on him once again.

“Well, we *do* have magic, but not like that.”

“Are you magic too? Nocta doesn’t usually take well to strangers.”

“Or Kaeya.”

“Devil bird...” He narrowed his eye at the bird. “She chases me around the house!”

“Aw, she’s not a devil bird, look how sweet she is.” Shifting her back onto his hand, Bennett held her out to them, consequently sending Kaeya a step back lest she decide to give chase. “Who’s a good bird? You are, yes you are.”

She flapped her wings and held her head up proudly in response to the shower of affection.

“Are you *sure* you’re not magical?”

“Nope, just a normal boy...other than the Prince thing...oh, and the bad luck, but no magic.”

“Fascinating how she reacts differently to certain individuals. I suppose some people just have a way with animals.”

“And some don’t.” After her comment, Eula snickered quietly when both brothers rolled their eyes, unsure who the jab was aimed at.

“Nocta, I’m sorry, okay? Please?” Clearly Diluc was reluctant to beg in front of the others, with his eyes drawn away and his arms crossed, but he couldn’t hide the mildly pouty expression across his face. Yet the bird he loved so dearly turned to Bennett, who nodded to urge her to forgive him. So with a softer screech, she took off and flapped over, taking her usual perch atop his shoulder.

“You’re one stubborn bird sometimes.”

“Did we just watch Diluc fight with his bird like an old married couple?”

“No-”

“I think we did...”

Kaeya shuffled around his brother to avoid the falcon’s wings being flapped warningly at him, and leaned on the bottom of the bed that Bennett was sitting on. “Back to the matter at hand,” he shot a glare at Nocta, “if you’d like, you can stay here-”

“And you’ll teach me to fight?” Already he looked eager to learn, eyes full of enthusiasm with a beaming smile, in turn bringing a smile to the face of his new teacher.

“Exactly. You ever held a sword before, kid?”

“He threatened you with one not that long ago.”

“Other than that.”

Bennett flashed an awkward smile and rubbed the back of his neck. “I had a toy sword when I was little? If that counts?”

“Well, that’s certainly... *a* start. But we’ll get you fighting properly.”

“We?”

“*I* will get you fighting properly.”

“Easier said than done.”

Chapter 5

“Slow down a bit!” Huffman stumbled along through the undergrowth. In front of him, the Wolven Prince was barely bothered by the thickening forest as they left the territory of Mondstadt and into the mystery that was Wolvendom. “I can barely keep up!”

No one had seen any sign of a kingdom in these forests, other than the merchants and tradesmen who went in and out with little effort. The natural barrier kept out any strangers, as well as protecting them from invaders - consequently doing the same for the western side of Mondstadt.

“If he gets to the gates before we find him, they could very well chase him out and finding him in the forest will be much harder.” Razor ducked under a low-hanging branch, finally stopping for a moment to glance over his shoulder at the knight reeling back from smacking his head on the same branch. He huffed, pulling him along. “Come *on*. ”

“I know you’re worried but we’ll find him-”

“If they chase him out, he might not *survive* in those woods.” He hated himself for it, but Razor could picture all the ways Bennett could die, *vividly*. A fall, the cold, trying to start a fire, poison berries, hunted, starvation, dehydration, drowning- and those were just the basics running through his mind. He hated every second of every scenario.

Then Huffman thought it over, and over, and over and *over*. “You’re right.”

Only a little while later, they veered off from a nearby stream into a thick growth of trees. When they emerged from the other side, the sight before them had Huffman utterly speechless. Before them stood no traditional city, rather an arena nestled *into* where the ground raised, a path carved out to meet the end of a bridge stretching across. The arena itself was crafted from ancient stone and intricately carved with swirling natural patterns.

At the other end of the bridge was a huge carving of a wolf face etched into a door, a guard stood vigilant on each side. Yet by far underneath the bridge was what Huffman was staring at while Razor was already heading across. Beneath his feet was a *pit*, a deep cylindrical pit stretching so far down it made his stomach turn. He could only just see the bottom, where large fields lay with paths cutting through them like rivers on a map, people moving along them while looking as small as ants.

The city was split into layers, each set back into the ground and sheltered from the elements above. Roads were along the innermost side of the circular city, lamps lit and seeming more and more like fireflies the further down he looked. People went about their days on each layer, pulling or pushing carts along, or just walking, whether it was alone or with their families, they all thrived in one way or another. Some would veer off onto the criss-crossing bridges each sheltered by the one above, they tucked under each other nicely, so sunlight still reached all the way down.

“Huffman, come *on* .” Razor huffed, having stopped only briefly to turn back expecting the knight to follow as soon as he sped off again. Which of course he did, hurrying along to catch up. As they got closer, the guards straightened up on instinct. Just like Razor, their heads were adorned with wolf ears, and behind them, their tails arched up upon seeing their prince marching towards them.

“Good afternoon, your highness, and...human.” Her voice dropped into a low growl.

“At ease, he’s a friend from Mondstadt.” Both guards visibly relaxed a bit, just enough to quell the pit of fear in Huffman’s stomach. “I need to know if you’ve seen my...friend.” He could feel the subtle heat rising in his face, the urge to say something a little... *more* than friend almost winning. “He’s human, white hair, freckles. A bit taller than me. Kinda lanky. Oh, and the greenest- um green eyes.”

The two glanced at each before turning back to him with a shake of their heads. “No sire. We haven’t heard about *any* humans from the other guards either, but you’re welcome to ask them.”

“Thank you, now would you open the gates?”

“Of course, your highness.” She knocked twice on the great door, the sound dull on the thick stone, barely reaching through the other side. Still, after a few seconds, it swung inwards, while at its base a thin, cooling mist trickled out only a few inches onto the bridge before it was dusted away by the gentle breeze. For such a big door, it barely made a creak, oddly silent. Then it collided with the inside wall and sent a huge, echoing *boooom* reverberating down through the city.

Again, Huffman peered over the railing of the bridge, finding quite a few people peering back up at him. While others continued on with their work, he could already see the gossip spreading, people stopping each other, leaning over to whisper or mutter before they’d continue on their way and stop the next person.

“Oh and if that human happens to come by, please let him in and send him straight to the Queen.”

“Yes, your highness.”

Despite his sensitive hearing, Razor’s ears - as well as the guards’ - only gave a dismissive flick to the sound before the Prince continued inwards. Huffman trailed behind, looking a little more like a lost puppy than he would’ve liked, but he couldn’t help but be nervous, especially since everyone they passed gave him a look that sent a painfully clear message: *humans were not often welcome here.*

They took twists and turns down a corridor dimly lit by candles, Razor navigating the maze-like structure like it was nothing. Right, left, another left, two rights and finally, they stopped at a door that Razor opened after a single knock. Seeing him now, he was completely different than back at the castle with Bennett, sharing stories in the courtyard, telling jokes, but now he was somehow more stoic than usual, with a clear sense of duty following him. It was because of this that as soon as the resting guards looked up at the open door, those that were awake got to their feet.

Inside was very clearly a barracks, beds lining the walls, a simple chest of drawers at the end of each one, small collections of personal items were either spread on top of the drawers or tucked away inside them. They were almost identical to the barracks at Mondstadt, though they weren’t *empty*. Huffman still slept in the barracks, though he was always alone as the Shadow Knights never left their posts. What he wouldn’t give to be woken up by the other knights shuffling past to head to their posts, armour clanging around awkwardly before someone threw a pillow at them to silence them. It brought a smile to his face just thinking about it.

That was when he realised most of the guards were now staring at the awkward human smiling to himself.

Razor took no notice, merely continuing with what they came here for. “Could I speak with whoever was on duty this morning, last night and yesterday evening?”

Without words, three pairs of guards - one of which had to be woken up - followed him out of the room. Their wary glances at Huffman didn’t go unnoticed, just ignored.

“While you were on duty, did any humans try to come in?”

“No, your highness.” They all answered at once.

“Not even passed by”

“No sire.”

Razor sighed. When his tail drooped, and his ears turned back, the guards gave each other concerned glances, yet said nothing. He looked down in thought, there had to be *something* else they could try other than just plain old searching.

After swallowing nervously, Huffman finally spoke up. “Thank you, that was very helpful.” To which the guards just nodded and awkwardly shuffled back into the barracks with the door closing behind them. He could see Razor was worried, it bled through the cracks of his barely expressional face as if it were the blood of his friend.

“Razor, it’ll be okay, we’ll find him.” He didn’t get any response but kept going. “We know he was taken west, the servant’s quarters is in the west wing, and it was a maid who saw him. So let’s start there. We search the west—”

“And then what? We can’t spend time looking for him when he could already be out there dead—”

“Listen. Thirteen years ago, when that... *thing* took over, my orders were to stay and protect him. And that’s not ending now. So even if you don’t help me I’ll still go, because Adelinde and I raised that boy, and I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t try my gods damn best to find him.” The stress was seeping into his mind to water the seeds of doubt within him, but he simply sighed and put on a sheepish smile. “Besides, Adelinde would scold me to hell and back if I gave up.”

He saw the hint of a smile, just a little glint of hope in his eyes as an idea brewed. “Wolvendom covers almost the entire west of Mondstadt, even if he didn’t make it to the city, he may have still made it *into* Wolvendom.”

“So, we search Wolvendom—”

“We don’t have to. Come on.” Now with determination spread across his face, he dragged the knight down through the city, barely letting poor Huffman process where they were heading. Down, down, down, they spiralled further into the depths of the city, giving Huffman a closer look at the mystery that was Wolvendom. Alleyways, streets, any pathways that were set back into the ground only circled around back to the main road or were dead ends leading to people’s houses. Those that weren’t lit by daylight were lit with dozens of lanterns.

Closer to the top were clearly the poorer areas, obvious from the dozens of doors to an alleyway, stacked and crammed in like books to a shelf. Tucked between doorways were crates, barrels, carts, carrying all manner of things.

A few layers down were the richer neighbourhoods, with more space, and even a few small gardens to themselves. Lined with moss and cave-dwelling plants, they were unlike any garden Huffman had ever seen before, flower beds lined with mushrooms, delicate clusters of flowers that would likely crumble like paper if they were even brushed by the wind. The opposite side of the same layer seemed even richer, bigger gardens per house, and even daylight shining right through them as if they were above ground.

Razor dipped into a grand street, not aligned with the usual ramps to get between layers. They slowed to a walk as they approached a ramp with a door taking up the whole back wall, intricately decorated with the same wolf carving on the main gates. As soon as they saw him, the guards opened the door.

Inside was just like a castle, portraits on the walls, carpets lining the halls. The only difference was the lower, flat ceilings. Already they were in a throne room, two mighty thrones standing tall on a couple of steps. While one was empty, on the other sat a fairly postured woman, her hair flowing over her left shoulder, light brown in colour and tied with a purple rose. Her green eyes looked up from the book held delicately in her hands and she smiled.

“Well, hello there sweetie, I didn’t expect you back so soon- and who’s this with you? Someone from Mondstadt perhaps?”

“Huffman, this is my mother, Queen Lisa.”

“You can just call me Lisa, I’ve heard a lot about you and, can I presume *your* boy? Um, Benny? Is it?” She set the book and opened her arms as a request for a hug - one that Razor gladly met.

“Bennett ma’am, and he’s not mine...or, not quite, it’s a fairly long story. In fact, we need your help to find him.”

“Oh?”

“Mother,” Razor stood up from the hug, “he was taken into the forest last night, and he...doesn’t know how to survive...”

“He was taken to be killed, ma’am, but we know he’s alive.”

“Oh dear me, that pesky Abyss Mage has gone much too far this time.”

“You know about *it*?”

“Well of course. I saw right through that little disguise it had.” As if merely getting up from dinner, she set her book aside and got to her feet. “Cyrus was a much cheerier man.”

“I’m sorry ma’am but, you didn’t think to *help* us?” His tone came out much sharper than he would’ve liked, especially as he was talking to the Queen, the *Queen* of a powerful kingdom he was currently *in*.

“Well, you see,” she gestured for them to follow as she headed for a pair of grandly decorated doors, “Abyss Mages have an elemental shield they use, should their opponents be rather powerful. Without the proper element to break it, you could throw an entire at it and gain nothing.”

“I see.”

“It only gets trickier when you have to find the opposite element. Water against fire, fire against ice. Not to mention only dwarves are powerful enough to actually summon elemental energy. So that’s three problems only starting with the shield.”

They went down a long, exquisite hallway, through another set of doors and into a similarly decorated room, though it was rather empty. Nothing but a single, large mirror suspended in mid air by...nothing, in a frame of ice.

The mirror itself looked to be made of ice, frost creeping at the edges. Just the sight of those wretched crystals made Huffman’s stomach turn slightly, the images of his friends and colleagues dying at the hands of spikes of the same dead cold substance. He could almost see the blood dripping from it, urging him to take a step back. The frame swirled delicately, in the form of vines and tree-like branches, nothing like the blades he’d come to know and fear.

“Now let’s see about finding your Benny.”

“Ma’am, he’s not-”

“Do you truly believe I was talking to you?” She raised an eyebrow as she looked over her shoulder at her son - who turned an almost violent shade of red.

“Mother-”

“Good afternoon Andrius.”

The image in the mirror - being themselves - swirled and stirred like ink in water, the colours drifted and faded into the icy silvers and blues of the frame. It didn’t take long for the shapes to shift into the familiar shape of the wolf’s face. Its eyes glowed a cooling blue.

Then it *spoke*. A deep, howling voice, with an oddly comforting tone to it, rang out from the mirror, the face barely moving to match. “Why hello Lisa, dearest Razor, and...Sir Huffman, Knight of Mondstadt.”

“How do- what- what is-”

“Now now Huffman calm down, this is Andrius, the Guardian of Wolvendom.”

Razor leaned over with a whisper and a smile as if the apparition were part of his family. “He oversees everything in the kingdom and forest.”

“It’s unlike you to bring a human before me. Is he someone special or is there some sort of problem he needs help with?”

“He and Razor need a little help.”

Huffman stumbled forwards as he was nudged unexpectedly. He stepped up to the mirror, swallowing the lump in his throat. “My so- Our Prince, Bennett, went missing in the forest late last night. Did he enter uh...your forest?”

“Your son-”

“He’s-”

“Your *son* didn’t enter Wolvendom last night, or today.”

Both Huffman and Razor looked visibly disappointed, their eyes sinking to the floor. It was as if their hearts sunk with them, their search well over before it even started. Lisa sighed with a smile. “Giving up already?”

“No but...mother, where do we start? He could be anywhere or...”

“Oh Razor, you mustn’t worry. Now, what do we do when something doesn’t work out?”

“Try...another way?”

“Precisely.”

Chapter 6

When Amber's scouting came up empty, it was proven safe enough for Bennett to stay, and after a few days of settling in, the first training session began. And of course, just as Diluc said; it *was* easier said than done. Not only was he working through swordsmanship from scratch, but Kaeya was quickly learning how significant Bennett's bad luck was - at first thought to be merely a lie to cover up his clumsiness. Yet within the first hour, the Prince had had numerous twigs and forest nuts dropped on his head, had stepped in a rabbit hole and fallen in the river, as well as nearly stabbing himself twice as a consequence of a few of the other bouts of bad luck. Still, Bennett was perseverent and eager to learn, though with a long stick instead of a sword, as the real thing had been confiscated by now.

While the others worked in the gardens and kitchen, Kaeya rambled on and on about swords - sometimes straying off topic to whatever limitless tale he could spin, from pirates to dragons. As he was nearby picking grapes, Diluc would occasionally comment, with most of them being light jabs at his brother.

Whooosh!

His swing had Bennett stumbling over his own feet, the force of it flung the stick from his hands. It flew right over Diluc's head before- *splash!* It fell right into the river.

"Well," Kaeya turned back to him, taking another stick off the pile they'd gathered after he threw the first one, "at least we know you've got strength in your swings. Try it one more time."

He caught the stick as it was thrown to him. Miraculously, he managed to keep a firm hold on it this time, and it didn't go flying this time. Though one mistake took the place of another and ended with Bennett falling onto the ground. He dropped his head back onto the grass with a sigh of defeat. The sun crept in through the leaves of the forest canopy to shine right in his eyes. Squinting and losing hope, he knew he wasn't going to get it on the first day, but what hope was there if he could barely swing the 'sword' without falling over?

With the silhouette blocking the sun, came an outstretched hand. "I hope you're not giving up already? Believe it or not you're making progress."

"I am?" He was pulled to his feet.

“Of course, you could barely even hold the sword three hours ago. Now you’ve almost got the first swing down.”

A little bit of encouragement was all he needed to perk himself back up. “Yeah! But I guess it would be better if I stopped throwing them, huh.”

“Could be a useful move, you never know what you could use. But yeah, maybe stop throwing them for now.” The teacher returned to his spot against the fence, eyes on his student. “Try shifting your weight into the swing this time.”

“Like...like this?” *Swooh!*

“Precisely, now try it again.” His smile grew a little, pride that he was unable to stop from sneaking in. The next few swings ended in much more success, even feeling more natural in his hand, and the overjoyed smile that Bennett had on his face only crammed more pride into Kaeya.

“Keep doing that and you’ll only get better and better.”

“Really?!”

He nodded.

“Thanks!”

“How about a little break? You’ve been enjoying my stories so far, so how about another?”

“Sounds great!” He flopped back onto the grass again, this time with a triumphant sigh. “You tell stories just like Huffman does.”

“Glad to see I have a fan. Y’know,” the tip of his sheath dug into the mud as he leaned on it like a walking stick, with the sword twirling around in his other hand, “I don’t think I’ve told you about the tale of the dragon who fell over the Southern Mountains, yet?”

“Oh! Varka told me that one once!”

“Did he now?”

“Yeah! He told me about how the dragons fought and the loser became the mountain. But Dad wasn’t too happy with how he described it to a four year old...”

From behind the trellis line with vines of grapes, Diluc looked up to shake his sun-hat adorned head, the basket in his hands barely visible behind the strings of leaves laden with bunches of grapes. “I see why he only told it *once*.”

“Yeah, it isn’t the *best* bedtime story, but it’s one hell of a tale.”

“You better tell it right this time.”

“Joining in are we then, Luc?”

“Only if you get it wrong, just get on it with it.”

“Alright, so,” he cleared his throat, “not too far from here lie the Southern Mountains, which are constantly shrouded in snow. Unusual rocks lay scattered over the mountains, pale and strangely shaped. Now some say these rocks aren’t that at all, but the bones of a long-fallen foe. What they don’t know, is that it’s *true*.”

Already, Bennett was captivated, propping himself up to listen intently. The story had nearly faded from memory, so at that moment, he looked just like a child being told the most exciting story in existence.

“Many years ago, possibly even hundreds, the land we know was threatened by a greatening force, and one day, that threat became real, they rose up and attacked Teyvat. Strange creatures crept through the kingdoms, but one overshadowing them all: The Black Serpentine Dragon.”

“But far above the clouds, flew the Dragon of the East,” Diluc merely shrugged off his brother’s glare at the story takeover with a small smirk, “who would not let this threat travel any further-”

“So! So, he descended from the shelter of the clouds for a starting surprise attack. The two dragons came crashing down onto the Southern Mountain. Legends say the cloud of snow and dust could be seen from the distant Thundering Islands across the seas. But the Serpentine Dragon was quick to rise, back up to the skies only to be thrown back down by the Dragon of the East! Talons dug into the stomach of the Serpentine Dragon! Deep into the guts-”

Diluc cleared his throat, an eyebrow raised.

“Uh, the blood of the dying dragon seeped into the ground and infected the land, turning it into a bleak, uninhabitable land of snow. The bones of the Black Serpentine Dragon still lay across the land to this day, with the mountain standing as a marker to all those who dare to plan an attack.”

“But about the other dragon? The Dragon of the East?”

“People say he-”

“People say he disappeared back into the clouds where he remains, forever protecting over the land below, but no threats powerful enough have arisen to call upon his need to protect.”

“Luc that was my favourite bit!”

“I know.” He grinned.

“So he’s still above the clouds?”

“That’s what people say.”

As Diluc stepped out from behind the grape vine, the story and Bennett’s attention fell under his control, allowing Kaeya to slink off unnoticed.

“Well, the story *is* hundreds of years old, so whether the Dragon of the East truly remains in the skies is a mystery. But it’s said that if he *does* descend, it’ll be with a mighty roar-”

“RAAWR !”

Bennett’s scream had the other dwarves rushing over, only to see teacher and student practically cackling with laughter. The two of them fell back onto the grass, giggling helplessly already, while Diluc watched with a light chuckle and a shake of his head.

“So- so did I tell, tell it right this time?” Kaeya clutched his side, weak with laughter, and the sight of Jean and Eula drawing their weapons and ready to defend only sent him spiralling further.

“I’d even say perfectly.”

“We heard a scream!” Amber and Noelle joined the party of worriers, weapons drawn.

“No need to worry, it’s just these three goofing around.” A small smile quirked at Jean’s lips as she sheathed her sword.

“Everyone alri-”

The forest echoed with more screams - the ones of those not incapacitated by a fit of giggles - as once again, Albedo cropped up behind them without a sight nor sound.

“Dear gods Albedo! How *do* you do that?!” Now laughing too, Eula barely caught her breath after the scare.

“Do what?”

“Just appear like that!”

“I simply do.”

As the conversation continued, Kaeya sat up, and wiping a joyful tear from his eye, leaned over to

Bennett with a whisper. “We’ve pulled that joke *so* many times, haven’t we?”

“Amber still falls for it everytime.” Diluc joined them on the grass, sighing ahead of time as he knew *exactly* what Kaeya was going to say.

“We’ve scared them all, *except* Albedo.”

“Let me guess, you want me to help?” Mischief glinted in the Prince’s eyes, then flashed through a grin that could only be described as plotting.

“Exactly, so,” the redhead leaned into the little huddle that had formed, “you in?”

“Of course!”

The little exchange caught Jean’s attention, and with her eyebrow raised in suspicion, she turned to the three. “What are you three plotting?”

“*Nothing* !”

“Somehow I don’t believe you...”

“Oh you shouldn’t. We’ve recruited Bennett into our ranks now.” Kaeya slung his arm around the Prince with a smirk spreading across the three. “You all better beware.”

Chapter 7

Days like that only grew in number, spread over the span of six months, with each party learning about each other bit by bit. Outings to the forest between training sessions developed into more than just swordsmanship, as the dwarves took to passing on their skills, sometimes without even realising. Though falconry lessons did become a routine after Diluc learned just how much nature loved Bennett - well, most of nature, as with the amount of pinecones, nuts and twigs that dropped on his head suggested the squirrels were out to get him.

Of course, as he was used to waking up early, Bennett joined the early risers with Jean, Noelle and Albedo - though sometimes it was questionable if he'd even slept - and to repay their kindness, he helped Noelle out with her cleaning most days.

While Jean worked on breakfast, Noelle took to her numerous chores and left Bennett to sweep the dirt tracked in throughout yesterday.

“Albedo,” Jean looked over her shoulder at the man practically nodding off at the table with under eye circles unnaturally prominent, “did you sleep at all last night?”

“Sleep is” he sleepily dropped his head onto the table, “a social construct.”

“I’ll take that as a no.” She sighed, her lecture fading into the background as Albedo turned to watching Bennett. The faint sound of the brush against the floor accompanied his humming. Subtle as it was, he was definitely - if badly - dancing around with the broom.

“...because you *need* to sleep otherwise-”

“Someone had a good dream.” He raised his voice just loud enough to snap the Prince back to reality and off of whatever cloud he’d floated up too.

“Hm?” He looked up with a bright smile. “Oh yeah!”

“Don’t change the subject-”

“Morning!” Amber bounced down the stairs with Diluc sleepily trailing behind her.

“Good morning!” Noelle sing-songed from the stove - having taken over breakfast lest it burn while Jean was in the middle of her lecture. “We’re making pancakes for breakfast but if you’d like something else I’d be happy to make it.”

“Oh no need! Pancakes sound great!”

“So Bennett,” to save himself from the rest of Jean’s lecture, Albedo continued, “what was this dream about?”

“Well...there was this like uh, village festival thing? And there were loads of stalls, mainly food ones, uh there was one with pies, cakes, and apples, berries - y’know I think I was hungry, but I’m sure there was one with flowers too.” He swept absently, eyes on the floor.

“Oh but the best part was the music! It was like uhm,” he hummed a little tune as Eula and Kaeya passed him to take their seats at the table. “And everyone started dancing around the square, I got swept up in it by-”

“Razor?” Albedo raised an eyebrow, and his knowing smirk spread to the others.

“You uh...how- how um- *noo* ...” His sweeping got faster, and faster, hurrying along with the job as seven knowing smirks were now aimed at him.

“You don’t sound too sure about that.”

“I...am. Sure. Yeah. I’m sure. Absolutely, definitely sure.”

“Is that so?” Mischief glimmered in Kaeya’s eye as he twirled the chair around before he actually sat down, the dramatic flare he added aimed to tease the obvious crush - even if Bennett wouldn’t *quite* call it that. “In that case, I’d like to know who it was that swept you off your feet and into a dance.”

Hushed laughter was sent around the table as Bennett’s mouth opened, closed, opened, then closed

again before he said, “Okay...it- it was him, but...how did you know?”

“Well, simply a bit of intuition based on observation...or that you talk in your sleep.”

They grinned at his sudden lack of movement and reddening face, his voice dropping to a whisper, “I do?”

“You do, and I must say you make wonderful background noise for a good book.”

“Uhm you’re...welcome?”

“Breakfast!” The table was soon filled with steaming plates of pancakes, with a spread of various toppings having been set up while the focus was on Bennett.

Undoubtedly grateful for the distraction, Bennett set the broom aside and took his seat. The table jolted as he failed to escape smacking his knee on the table once again - which had become a daily occurrence.

“So,” Jean began, “what’s everyone’s plans for today?”

“I shall be off collecting tree samples to test my latest alchemic equations. I plan to test the patterns that the rhytidome possess and how they differ from different species and families of tree.”

“...right, so anyone else?”

“Oh, I’ll be heading into Mondstadt to fetch some flour. If anyone would like anything, or even to join me, they’re welcome to.” As always, Noelle finished with a pleasantly inviting smile.

Glances were cast at Bennett, half expecting him to volunteer to go to the kingdom, as he’d done so many times before. Yet he simply continued to eat his breakfast without batting an eye. As much as he wanted to help his people, he knew it was dangerous for him to go anywhere near the village, especially with the Mage now making almost daily appearances to ‘gloat at the people’ as Diluc had said on return from his last visit. It was clear on his face, even with the way he was fixed on his plate; he *did* want to go.

“I believe we’re low on sugar as well.” Diluc continued, glancing over at the kitchen.

“I’ll pick some up, don’t worry.”

He gave a small hum of thanks through the pancakes.

Before the silence turned awkward, Kaeya chimed in. “Might I join you? I thought a trip to the tavern might be nice-” He looked around at the numerous eyes on him, belonging to Albedo, Diluc and Jean. Staring him down as if he were about to commit a heinous crime. “Something wrong?”

“We’ve spoken. About the tavern.”

“I’m well aware, but I believe that it wouldn’t hurt to-”

“Don’t you have a training session this morning?”

For a rare moment, Kaeya was rendered quiet, before he merely shook it off with a click of his tongue. “Well yes, we do indeed.”

“So you’re staying here to do that.”

“Well of course.”

Everyone laughed or rolled their eyes. And with the chatter only stopping for mouthfuls of pancakes, breakfast practically flew by, and the clean-up easily followed suit. A chain of hands passed the plates to the sink, and on the other side - after drying - to the cupboard. Cutlery went next, and after a wipe of the table, they were done.

By the time they split off for their days, the sunny morning had clouded over with the prospect of rain. Yet they continued on, umbrellas and coats in hand, and those who lingered near the cottage were ready to run for cover. Just in the shadow of the house, a lesson was beginning.

“Alright,” Kaeya clapped his hands together with a cautious glance at the sky, “I think we’ll just have a spar, focus mainly on your attack today.”

With a dramatic flick of his capelet, the teacher drew his sword. “Ready?”

He took a deep breath. “Ready.”

Already their swords had clashed. Taking a defensive position, Kaeya grinned proudly over the blades. “Very nice first strike!”

They parted, then clashed again and again. Fast on his feet, Bennett ran circles around his teacher, striking whenever and wherever he could, but his opponent was always ready. Round and round the training area they fought, ducking and striking. A swing from the Prince was either met with Kaeya’s blade, or missed entirely. All the while he spouted little bits of advice and praise.

Swoosh! “Keep your balance!”

Clang! “You’re doing well!”

He ducked under the next swing. And the next. But a kick aimed at his feet almost brought the teacher down.

“Woah! You’re getting good at this!”

“I learn from the best!” Another kick proved that Kaeya had learnt from his mistake as he jumped back. Blades met in the middle, grins were matched and reflected in the steel. The spar almost became a dance, teacher and student nearly evenly matched. But Kaeya was yet to strike.

A smirk plastered on his face, the first swing caught Bennett by surprise. Off balance and confused, the second swing sent him tumbling down, with his sword flung from his hand and into a bush.

“I thought you were only defending!” He scrambled across the ground, away from his teacher.

“It’s good to be prepared for anything. Now remember what I said about not *just* using your sword?” He approached to deliver the final blow - a mere gentle tap to the heart would end the match. Though he was slow, giving his student a moment or two to recover from his mistakes.

“Yeah, to use my head as well!” Now Bennett was a quick thinker, he always had been, so that moment was all he needed. He kicked up the dirt, sending it flying all over Kaeya, who instinctively shielded his eye. As soon as Kaeya’s guard was down, Bennett made a break for his sword.

“Excellently done.” He lowered his arm to see his student gone. Though the yelp of surprise and the amount of joyously loud laughter coming from behind the bush told him right where he was. “Sneak attacks are no good if I can hear-”

The sight that greeted him was certainly a strange one, or rather, a *sharp* one. When he pushed his way through the bush, he was met with the blade of an unfamiliar sword. The blade was wide, more like a greatsword, which made it all the more surprising to see a young boy on the other end. His arms were wrapped tightly around Bennett, only pulling him closer to draw the weapon on Kaeya. He sent an unrelenting glare rolling over the edge of the blade like drops of blood. The wolf ears atop his head folded back with what could only be described as a growl stalking through the background chatter of the forest.

“Uhm...hi?”

His growl only got louder as Kaeya raised his sword to match the threat. As he pulled him ever so slightly closer, his eyes scanned over Bennett, checking him over and over for injury between the wary glances at Kaeya.

“Uh, Kaeya this is Razor,” at the mere mention of Razor’s name, Kaeya lowered his sword with a smile, “and Razor, this is Kaeya, he’s a good friend.”

“Well it’s nice to finally-”

“Is he working for... *it* ?”

“...meet you.”

“Nope! I’m sure of it.”

“Are you *sure*?” The Wolven Prince had practically checked him over three times now, yet he deemed a fourth necessary. Once again looking over his face, eyes racing to fret over every freckle, every scar he’d had before - and shooting concerned looks at the new ones. He ran his thumb over a recent scar on the back of Bennett’s hand. It was only small, from a brush with a thorned bush, but still present.

“I think-” Kaeya merely raised an eyebrow at the glare once again sent his way, and continued as if he weren’t being threatened with - most likely - death, even sheathing his sword, “if I *were* working for ‘it’, I would’ve killed him months ago.”

Razor looked to Bennett for confirmation, and the nod he answered with made Razor - slowly, and as obviously reluctant as possible - lower his greatsword. But he kept glancing between the two, and every look he gave the Prince said exactly what his heart wanted, but his voice didn’t; *I was afraid I lost you.*

“I suppose you have a point...”

“Exactly! And he’s been teaching me how to fight, and the others have been teaching me all sorts of things-”

“Others?”

“Albedo should be back from the forest by now, so you could come meet everyone?”

“Oh, Noelle might still be in Mondstadt.”

Razor took a moment to silently consider his options, Bennett did *seem* to trust Kaeya, as well as these others they spoke of, but who’s to say it wasn’t a trick or a trap. Sure he was alive and well - not to mention looked as happy as ever - but from what he’d heard, the Abyss Mage was known for being cruel. Yet the eager, pleading smile on Bennett’s face tugged at his heart, he was just...so wonderfully *him*. Cheerful and so excited to introduce his new friends when he’d rarely had any, at that moment his smile was just adorable.

“Alright...but you trust *all* of them?”

“Of course! They saved my life after all!” With that he was off towards the cottage, led by his teacher. Still, Razor held him as close as he could while they walked, clinging to him as if he’d slip through his fingers and disappear like a dream in the morning. He couldn’t count how many times he’d imagined this moment and had it stolen by the setting moon, to wake up and find himself still searching.

In just a few steps, they were in the cottage gardens. Baskets, gardening gloves, hats, all manner of things were strewn across the gardens, left abandoned by the dwarves who *should’ve* been working away.

“Aaand, they’re behind us.” Kaeya raised an eyebrow as he spun on his heels. As the other two turned around, they were met with weapons drawn and aimed at them.

The end of Amber’s arrow glowed with a ball of fire, sparks flying off into the air as she drew the arrow a little further back. “And who might you be?”

“Prince Razor of Wolvendom.” He bowed merely as a formality. His wary expression softened slightly as he noted how they pointed their weapons, aiming to separate him from their friends before attacking if he proved a threat.

“So *this* is the famous Razor.”

He couldn’t help but glance at Bennett with a questioning look, though he already has his suspicions as to Bennett’s answer. “Famous?”

“I uh,” of course he rubbed the back of his neck with an awkward smile, just as he’d done many times before, “I tend to talk about you, a...bit.”

“A *lot*. ”

“I- not *that* much...”

“Only almost every day.”

“Not to mention the nights, why just last night he had a-”

“ *WHY* - why don’t I introduce them. Razor, this is Diluc, Jean, Albedo, Amber and Eula.”

“And I’m Noelle.” Her voice sing-songed from behind, a smile greeting them when they turned to her. She had a bag of flour over one shoulder and sugar over the other, yet was unbothered by the weight. “It’s wonderfully nice to meet you.”

“You too...uhm.” Razor glanced at them all, wary enough for them to notice and put away their weapons, though it didn’t ease him enough to not take Bennett’s hand in his and pull him as close as possible.

“How about we head inside and have some tea?”

“Great idea!”

Once inside, they all settled down and Noelle got to making tea, rushing around in her usual busied manner. Teacups were passed around, the sugar bowl and milk jug taking their places in the middle of the table soon after.

“Oh, Amber, Diluc, would one of you mind lighting the stove please?”

“On it!” As Diluc had taken to being as threatening as possible - watching Razor’s every move with his eyes narrowed and greatsword in hand as it crackled and glowed like embers - Amber hopped to her feet. The tip of her finger burst into a flame that she used to light the stove top.

“Thank you!” She hummed, popping the kettle atop the flame. “Won’t be long now.”

“So,” Razor had finished quietly observing and scanning the room, “how did you meet... them?”

“Long story short, we fished him out of the river.”

At his teacher’s comment, Bennett rubbed the back of his neck with an awkward, sheepish smile.

"Yeah, the uh, the branch kinda...broke beneath my feet and I fell in...But I guess for once luck was on my side cause I ended up here."

Razor chuckled, still as coarse as ever, but equally as warm and comforting. He pulled the chair Bennett was sitting on closer, dragging it across the floor as a pale blush dusted his cheeks. "Then luck must've led me here too."

"It must've." A smile he was helpless to stop spread across his face. Glances and giggles went around the room as the two continued talking together, their faces lighting up as they finally caught up. Razor gladly sat and listened to the many tales of adventure Bennett had been on while he'd been searching, even chiming in when luck made their paths just miss each other. All the while, the dwarves watched contentedly. After months of witnessing one half of this admittedly sweet relationship, seeing the other half feel the exact same way brought smiles to all of their faces - even cracking through Diluc's attempt of intimidation.

By the time the final bout of laughter died down, half-empty cups of tea had grown stone cold - other than Diluc and Amber's of course, as they just heated them again with magic. Bennett's chair had only gotten closer to Razor's, whether it be from him being pulled across by the Wolve Prince himself, or subtly pushed by the dwarves whenever he stood up.

"...So I went south after that, searched all over the mountains for you, while Huffman went north." He glanced out the window, now pouring with rain outside. His eyes stopped on the clock next, both hands pointing straight up at the strike of noon.

"All the way to the mountains?"

"Yeah, I was just on my way back and..." Razor turned back to him, reluctant to change the subject, "I know I only just found you, but..."

"But?"

"Huffman and I agreed to meet back at the castle at noon. I'm already late," he got to his feet with a stretch, "he needs to know you've been found."

They walked to the door together, side by side. "Will you be coming back?"

“Of course!” He pulled him into a warm, lingering hug, and oh how they’d both missed this. Behind him, Razor’s tail wagged like there was no tomorrow, nearly just a blur of silver joy. ”After all this time I wouldn’t leave you so soon. I’ll come right back, I promise.”

Yet there he stayed, stood in the doorway, looking up at Bennett as they shifted out of the hug into...something different. Arms around each other, just looking at each other for a moment longer, then another, then another-

“Off you go then silly,” he gave him a gentle push, “the sooner you leave, the sooner you get back, right?”

He chuckled, waving as he stumbled away with a smile as he pulled his coat up over his ears.
“Right! I’ll see you soon!”

“See you soon!” Of course he lingered by the door, even after he was long gone. The forest looked the same as it always did, sure, but it felt so much brighter. Or maybe it was just the boy *still* standing in the doorway, looking out at the rain in waiting.

Diluc cleared his throat, a grin badly hidden behind his teacup, and when the Prince turned around, Kaeya chimed in with, “Well *someone* has it bad.”

“Dreaming about him and now *that*? How can he not?”

All Bennett did in his defence was turn a deep shade of pink and stick his tongue out at them.

~

“Huffman!” Razor vaulted over the castle to where the Knight was waiting in the rain, already soaked to the bone.

“Your highness, you’re late-”

“I found him!”

Huffman practically looked as though he'd just been handed a newborn after a *very* long night of pain, filled with disbelief and what could've been joy or some other form of it. He had no words, all he could do was stare at Razor with his mouth hanging open while his brain lagged behind to process.

“Teyvat to Huffman?! I *found* him!”

“Whe- *where* ?!”

He glanced around, the yard around them was empty, with the kitchen bustling on the other side of a door, the light and sounds only just creeping out over the rain. Not a single telltale sign of the Abyss Mage so he continued. “There’s a cottage a few miles south of here, he’s been there the whole time, right in front of us!”

“How did we not-”

“I don’t know! But now we *found* him! Come on!” He made to turn towards the wall, to lead him to the one they’d been searching for for months without end. But instead, Huffman turned to rush to the kitchen, stumbling on the soaked stone steps.

“I- I have to tell Adelinde!” He skidded to a halt in the doorway, spinning on his heels to call over the pouring rain. “Meet me back here tomorrow! You can take us to him!”

“We could go now!-”

The door closed behind him and Razor was left to climb back over the wall to return as the temperature of the land dropped and a chill enveloped the land like a blanket.

“Huffman? Oh my- you’re soaked!” As soon as the door closed behind him, a solemn look overcame his face while Adelinde wrapped a blanket around him. “I told you, you should’ve taken a cloak, your armour can’t protect you from the cold as well as a cloak. You’ll freeze!”

She busied herself with making a warm drink, glancing over at him frequently. “Did either of you find him?”

He sighed. "Still nothing."

"Well, I suppose you'll have to keep looking," she sighed, "I'm worried about him, and you. You've been gone a lot more lately."

When she held out the cup to him, he wrapped his hands around it, nodding silently to thank her. "I'm just out looking for him, that's all—"

"And what if *it* suspects something?"

"It won't, trust me," he pulled himself to his feet, "I always watch my back."

"Just... *please* be careful."

"Don't worry," as he headed to the door, he turned back with a smile, "I will be."

Yet as the door closed, the cup was abandoned on the first surface he found. The blanket was shoved off his shoulders and before it had the chance to hit the ground, he was completely dry. He weaved through the halls of the castle, nodding politely to any filthy humans he passed.

"Draff." He stopped in front of the hunter, a clearly forced smile on his face.

"Oh, afternoon Sir Huffman. Can I...help you?"

"Would you care to join me? I have some news I'd like you to deliver."

Down the numerous staircases, they eventually reached the dungeons. A dull, repetitive scraping echoed through the nearly empty dungeons - there wasn't much need for a dungeon anymore, rulebreakers were dealt with *swiftly*. Draff nearly turned tail and ran at the sight of...well, Huffman *dripping* away like blood, pooling onto the floor before disappearing into the cracks of stone. Underneath was the cruel trickster he feared: the Abyss Mage.

He followed for fear of his own safety. It wasn't until they reached the furthest cell did that ear-piercing voice power over the scraping as the prisoner inside dragged a file across the bars again and again. "Well then, Huffman, I've brought you a visitor."

On the other side of the bars, Huffman - stripped of his armour and looking dreadful with his tired eyes and skin scuffed with dry dirt - lifted his head to them, palming the file. He didn't say a word, just glare into the empty eyes of the tyrant's mask.

"Also I'll take that file, can't have you escaping on me, can I?" It held out its hand, the file almost sinking into the inky blackness when it was handed over. "Now Draff, why don't you tell him the good news?"

"I- I'm sorry, your majesty?"

"Oh do you not know? That's completely, utterly *fine* ." Through the crackling voice, it was clear the words were forced, fake, their truths merely imaginary. "I suppose I shall simply have to ask you; *why* has the runaway brat been found *alive* ?"

"The-"

"The Prince! Are you truly that incompetent?! You thought I wouldn't get word of his survival when *I own this land*." A spear of ice pierced straight through Draff's chest. He spluttered as the weapon melted away, stealing more and more blood to deliver it to the uncaring hands of the stone floor.

"Draff!-"

"Your ears , your voice, your *thoughts*, they're all *mine*. I *own* all of you! Every baker, maid, butler, hunter, knight! Every man, woman, child, every *creature* that I *allow* to survive in *my land*! So if you wish to get away with something like *that*. *Then you should try fool anyone else* . "

The hunter dropped to the floor. With one final splutter, his heart stopped. And while Huffman could only stare in horror, the Mage laughed. It laughed like it had heard a funny joke. It laughed like there was a jester performing for it. It *laughed* as if there wasn't a man *dead* at its feet.

"Well he was certainly stupid." It sighed in satisfaction. "Now, be assured that when I return, the

Prince will be dead. *I don't fail.*"

As it turned and floated away, his calls echoed around the dead quiet dungeon. All he could do was call it names, he was powerless to stop it, to warn Adelinde or Razor, tell them to run away with Bennett and never return. He was trapped in the dungeon of the castle he once guarded. "*Monster!*"

Any footsteps heard were merely his own or from those outside, as what monster would make something as mortal as footsteps?

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

We have another chapter! This one was by far my favourite to write
But I've only written the next two chapters after this, so updates might get a bit slower
after those but don't worry, I won't be abandoning this at all :D

By the time Razor found the river to follow along to the cottage, the hammering rain had eased and faded into little more than sprinkling snow. Now rather than a rapid sprint to avoid getting too wet, he could enjoy the walk back to the cottage. A little robin flew along his path, flittering on ahead as it sung its merry tune. It brought back his constantly small smile as the cheery little song summed up his mood in just a few notes.

As he followed the robin into the clearing, Amber popped up from behind one of the barrels littered around the clearing, dusting off her hands after Eula took the crate from her hands. "Ah, perfect timing! We just finished setting up!"

"Setting...up?" He looked around, many of the barrels and crates had been moved aside, their cart tucked alongside the cottage to create a larger open space than before. At first, it didn't seem too strange, but the weapons rack had been moved too, all the weapons accounted for except one empty place where a sword would be. Though it did get rather odd when he looked across at the dwarves, music stands set up in front of them, a violin in Diluc's hand, and a flute in Jean's, with Noelle sat on a crate just behind them, talking quietly with the two musicians - something about keeping a beat.

"Yeah, we've got something planned for you two!" The answer only confused him more, he'd only met these people a few hours ago and they were already planning surprises for him...

"Okay whoever wants raspberries, they do *not* grow in winter because all the bushes are...bare... what's going on?" Bennett emerged from the other direction of the forest, basket in hand as he pulled down his cloak's hood. Even he seemed to find the scene strange, especially with seven mischievous grins aimed at him.

"Now!"

On Eula's signal, both princes were sent stumbling forward into the cleared area, pushed by the only two dwarves left unseen - the two they'd walked right past. Amber took the hands of Razor,

just before he fell over, but just to his left, Bennett wasn't so lucky, falling right into the thin layer of settling snow.

"Now, when learning to dance—"

"*Dance?!*" Bennett lifted his head, little flakes of grass and snow scattered over the front of his hair.

But she just ignored him and turned to Razor. "Your highness, were you taught how to waltz?"

"Um...yes? When I was very little but—"

"Perfect! Now, on your feet Bennett, all you have to do is follow our leads." She waited for him to pull himself back up before clapping for the music.

"And, one, two, three- one, two, three—"

Razor followed the steps, just like he'd been taught many years ago, a simple one, two, three. The music echoed happily around the forest, perfectly in time with the songs of the bird who stayed for winter. It seemed to be a rather town-ish tune, slowed for the sake of learning and starting with just the violin.

Yet they only did just enough steps for Bennett to stop falling over himself as he was practically dragged along by Eula. That was when their teachers spun their partners away and right into each other, and just danced away.

Their arms naturally fell to rest as they should. Their hands together, Bennett's hand on his shoulder, and Razor became almost painfully aware his hand was on Bennett's waist. As well as that he could only pull him *closer*.

"Hi..."

"Hey, uh..." He looked up at the Prince, at the snowflakes sprinkled across his hair like sugar, then at the crystalline dew they melted into. Admittedly, the sight caused him to lose his breath for

several seconds. “Hey...”

“You...you already said that.” With his cheeks turning a soft pink, and that smile, at that moment he was far too precious, like some kind of treasure others would want to steal and keep to themselves. So the hand on his waist pulled him *closer*.

“So I did...um, you uh you dance, very...well.”

“Razor?”

“Hm?”

His voice dropped to a whisper, glancing down at their feet. “We’re not moving.”

“We’re...” Looking down, it was just as Bennett said. As impossible as it felt, their feet were still planted firmly on the ground, though Razor was sure he’d been floating up to cupid’s cloud only seconds ago. “Oh...”

Finally, their feet started to move. Only just in time with the music as the flute entered the mix and the song quickened ever so slightly. The song bounced along to a clear, joyous rhythm, the highs and lows matched by the movements of their makers.

They twirled around, around and around, dancing, albeit rather clumsy on one part. But even though his feet were being stepped on every five seconds, Razor’s stoic manner broke to make way for his raspy chuckle. “You’ve never done this before, have you?”

“Well, I *think* I did it once when I was a kid, but I’m pretty sure I was standing on Adelinde’s feet the whole time.” He kept his head down, watching his feet as the steps drifted out of his mind.

“Ow!-”

“Sorry!” But still they laughed together.

Beside them, Kaeya and Albedo waltzed closer, the latter dropping his partner into a dramatic dip, their waltz much less subtle with added flare. Both grinning and watched by the rest, Kaeya looked up from where he was practically on the ground. "Well you two look like you're having fun."

"We are- *Ow* !- I think this is turning into more of an attack on my feet than a dance."

"Hey! I'm trying!" The smile on his face was left untouched by the light jab, although almost everyone was sure they saw it grow a little brighter.

"Okay, first lesson," though Razor's hands were as rough as sandpaper, his touch was so gentle as he lifted his chin to meet his eyes once more and whispered, "don't look at your feet."

"Now you're just asking for it." He couldn't but glance down at their feet once more with a smile, softening his tone to match.

It was one of those rare moments where Razor not only smiled, but chuckled too. Though not as bright as those of his dance partner's, both were unbearably warm. "Just trust me."

Hearts skipping beats, and eyes caught in the trap set for them, they fell into a priceless silence, spinning around and around, step after step. Of course, simply not looking at his feet didn't fix his dancing, but it certainly improved it. The steps almost came naturally, taken straight out of a nearly forgotten dream, though if he did slip up, they were both far too distracted to notice. Nor did they notice the other dancers leaving the snowy dance floor.

Encouraging them to stay lost on whatever cloud had lifted them far up into the stars wasn't a difficult task, yet no effort was spared. Gradually, the flute faded away, and the violin took a slow turn. It was anything but sad, reminiscent of a dream they'd both had once upon a time, the steps taken from the same dream falling perfectly in time. The snow delicately fell around them to bury Bennett's mistaken steps, and show the world just how beautiful their own little cloud was.

Before they knew it, they'd stopped. Just for a moment. A single, perfect moment.

And in that idyllic moment, Razor's heart guided him. Down they went into a gentle dip, hands shifting perfectly in time to support one another.

"I think..." he breathed. From atop their cloud, gravity called him downwards, ever closer to

Bennett. "You're getting..." But the second time, gravity had nothing to do with it, he was just so tempted, drawn in without a sign to stop, only to continue. He inched closer and closer, and pulling the Prince up to meet him was no trouble when he supported him so effortlessly. He just couldn't help it, every little detail of him only drew him in endlessly, every little freckle, every scar, every shade of green in those wonderfully bright eyes. Suddenly he was so close that those watching them didn't matter, and their eyes started instinctively, drifting closed.

"Better- OW! " Of course an acorn hitting the back of Razor's head killed the moment in one fell swoop, but set off quiet, absent-minded laughter between the two of them. The violin cried out in a horrific screech of fright as Diluc was startled by the sudden yelp, with seven groans of pain following after it.

"I think that was meant for me," his voice dropped to a whisper, "the squirrels are out to get me, I'm sure of it."

"Well then, I suppose I could double as your knight in shining armour." Together, they straightened up out of the last move of their dance.

"Pretty sure you already are!" Kaeya called over from where they were sitting, a grin across all of their faces - even Diluc's as he rolled his eyes and packed away his violin.

"Hey! I haven't been in danger yet!" Bennett may have left his side to pull ahead towards the dwarves, but their hands didn't part.

All at once, everyone - including Razor - had listed at least two times Bennett had been in danger that they'd either heard of, or witnessed themselves. Including everything from bouts of bad luck, falling out of a shocking number of trees, and attempts on his life by the Mage. It was a chorus rivalling those of chattering birds,

"Okay I haven't been in *mortal* danger yet." They all just stared at him. "Okay no more than once!"

Again, they just *looked* at him, somehow all making the exact same expression. So he turned back to Razor, who just had a smaller, more subtle version of the same face. His eyebrow raised with a tiny smirk.

"Fine, no more than *twice!* But it won't happen anymore!"

"Is that so?"

"*You trained me.*"

Kaeya nodded along. "Well yes, but you have made a habit of putting your life in danger, who knows how much sword fighting can help against gravity."

"Okay so maybe I do, but- *ow - OW!*" Even though Bennett would've probably done it himself, the universe decided to prove Kaeya's point, by once again dropping something on his head. Before he even had a chance to open his mouth, a tawny owl swooped out of the cloudy sky and landed on his shoulder. With its wing over his head, and feathers falling over his eyes, the laughter echoing through the forest could only be described as hysterical. Even Razor was struggling to keep a straight face as Bennett sighed with a smile. "I can't tell if nature hates me or not."

The owl turned his head with a questioning *whoooo*, he dropped his head to the side as he looked upon the strange sight of seven dwarves weak with laughter.

"Wissen?" Just as Razor recognised the owl, the owl recognised him, hooting for joy as it flapped his wings - consequently smacking Bennett on the head. "Alright, come here."

Wissen hopped across to his hand, digging his claws into the gloves Razor always wore. He settled on his hand with a contented cheery chirp.

"You know this owl?"

"He's my mother's messenger owl." He shifted the owl across to his right hand to take the message. It was a small scroll tied with a thin purple ribbon that was easily untied. Inside was his mother's delicately swirling handwriting, as beautiful as the penmanship was, the message was anything but:

'Razor,

I'm sorry to pull you away from your search, but I fear it's too dangerous for you to continue. An army is gathering on the border.

Please return as soon as you get this message, and avoid the Mondstadt border at all costs.

- Mother'

Already Razor was sprinting away, launching Wissen into the air to fly on ahead. Ducking and leaping, weaving through the trees, he moved like a true wolf at such speed. The forest was flying past him.

Only a little way's behind him, Bennett had barely processed what was happening, making a split second decision with an obvious answer. "Razor!" He was already falling behind, stumbling over the roots as well as his own feet. "Wait! Just- where are you going?!"

Razor stopped so suddenly that he ran right into his back as if a brick wall had cropped up in front of him with no time to slow down. The force of the collision sent them both straight to the ground. By the time Bennett looked up, the other was already on his feet and brushing himself off. "Sorry," Razor panted, "there's a- a problem."

"Something serious?" He hoisted himself to his feet.

He nodded. "An army on the Mondstadt border. I have to go, but I've only just found you—" He perked up as an idea struck him. "Come with me." Bennett just looked on at him in confusion. "Come to Wolvendom with me..."

"If it's on the border, I can't. We'd have to cross it and if anyone saw me..."

"Right, maybe uhm—"

"Hey, stop thinking so much about it." There was that smile, as reassuring as the sun rising and just as warm. "I'll be fine! I'm not *that* clumsy."

Somehow with all that was going on, Razor found a small chuckle within him. "You know that's not what I'm worried about."

"Well that's all you need to worry about, and I promise not to climb up any trees or go near the river or anything. Now go help your kingdom."

"Promise?" He couldn't help but inch closer, gently taking Bennett's hand in his and running his thumb over scars old and new, over the bandages over his wrist from the remnants of a sprain.

“I *promise*, now go on, before another acorn drops on my head and destroys my point.”

“Alright.” For a moment, he leaned a little closer, hovering there for a second as the battle in his mind raged and sped through at rapid speed. In all honesty, he *wanted* to kiss him, even if it was just a little peck on the cheek, he *wanted* to take that next step, to hold him and whisk him away back up to their own little cloud. But he hesitated. What if he wasn’t ready, or if Razor was misreading all of this like he’d done a couple times before?

In the same split second, Razor snapped back to reality and stepped back to leave. “I’ll try come back in a few days.”

“I’ll see you then.”

After a final smile, Razor disappeared into the depths of the forest, only stopping to listen and shake his head fondly as he heard Bennett’s familiar “*ow!*” when another twig or acorn dropped from the trees. Part of him wanted to go back, but the other part of him forced him onwards towards Wolvendom, where he was needed.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Okay a little warning that was probably expected but I'll put it here anyway:

- Poison
- Body horror near the end

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By the next day, the clouds had darkened, but even with the threat of heavier weather, the snow remained as little more than a sprinkling, only gradually building up as it settled on the forest floor. The trees' dead branches only had a light dusting, barely able to hold the snow without their leaves to help. Those flakes that landed in the river were quickly swallowed up and joined the rushing water, stolen from the sky without a second thought.

Late in the afternoon, the dwarves were busying themselves with various tasks, cooking stew for dinner, cleaning, repairing whatever needed the attention, even heading into Mondstadt for their final few supplies that would last them through winter. Most were inside, and with his chores done, Bennett stepped outside, very quickly diving back in for his coat and gloves as he realised just how cold it was. When he returned to the cold air outside, he smiled at his breath turning to a cloud among the falling snow.

As he set off for a walk, it brought back fond memories of playing in the snow as a child, with the inevitable cold or sniffles afterwards despite how cosily he'd been wrapped up beforehand. No amount of layers had fought off the sickness that followed his wonderfully fun snow days, even now he'd always come back with a cold, but he didn't mind. Snow days were always fun.

He picked his sword up off the weapon rack, sliding the sheath onto his belt. His smile was undefeated by the cold, merely warming itself back up as he headed for the forest for a walk.

The forest was quiet, but peaceful. Most of the wildlife had either fled from the cold or was curled up in some cosy burrow or tree hollow. Everything was coated in a wonderful crystalline layer of frost, glistening in the afternoon sun that filtered through the leafless trees. He was perfectly at ease with the forest, until-

“Hey-” A pair of hands settled on his waist. Immediately, he reached to draw his sword, that was until he turned around and saw the familiar face of the Wolven Prince.

“Archons Razor! I nearly *stabbed* you!”

“Well I’m glad you didn’t, it would’ve made this awkward.”

“Awkward *definitely* wouldn’t cut it. I didn’t think you’d be back for a few days.” Hand leaving his sword, he settled into Razor’s hold with a smile. “Is everything sorted?”

“Mhm, they retreated last night. It was probably just an attempt to scare us anyway.”

“That’s good,” he noted Razor wasn’t wearing a thick coat to protect him from the cold, or anything like that for that matter, “aren’t you cold?”

“I don’t really feel the cold. Unlike you,” he chuckled hoarsely, “your nose is all red.”

He felt his nose, feeling nothing through the warmth of his gloves. “That’ll be my annual cold setting in. Happens every winter, and lasts all winter too.”

“Only *you’re* unlucky enough for that to happen. What’re you doing out here anyway? You should be tucked away by a fire, all nice and warm and away from the ice.”

“Oh come on, I’m not *that* pathetic.” He couldn’t help it when his smile only got bigger.

“Well of course not, but I *did* say I’d be your knight in shining armour, didn’t I? That means protecting you from the cold too.”

“Sure it does, how exactly are you going to do that?”

Razor pulled him back into his arms with a small grin. “Wrap you in the warmest blanket I can find and keep you inside by the fire. Now don’t go avoiding my question, what’re you doing out here?”

“I’m only going for a walk, nothing dangerous, just as promised.”

“Then might I join you?” Despite gravity’s best efforts, Razor easily caught the next acorn to be aimed at Bennett’s head, throwing it aside as if it were nothing. “You never know how many squirrels are out there.”

“You know you don’t need to ask to join me on a walk.” Together they set off into the forest. There was no path for them to follow, just snow as far as the eye could see, still they kept going. Their footsteps crunched beneath them, but was buried under their ability to enjoy a conversation about anything and everything. As usual, Bennett did most of the talking, with Razor more than happy to listen and laugh along.

“...and they all ran over thinking we were in trouble!” Their laughter rang clear through the forest, disturbing the few creatures that didn’t retreat for the winter. They didn’t get very far before Bennett was downed by a branch unable to bear the weight of the snow forever piling up.

When he suddenly lost the prince by his side, Razor stopped and looked back. The sight of Bennett just laying there with a pile of snow on his head as he processed the situation, had Razor chuckling. “Seems even the snow’s out to get you.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.” He hauled himself to his feet, with a smile so effortlessly unyielding not even a facefull of cold snow stopped it. “It has been for thirteen years.”

“But you’re safe now, I’ll *always* find you in time.” Protective arms wound their way around him, holding him close as if he’d slip away.

“Now don’t go all serious on me, especially when you’re about to get covered in snow too.”

“What-”

Poor Razor barely got any time to react to the grin on Bennett’s face before he was met with a face full of snow. Bennett leaned back so suddenly that they both went tumbling, landing on his back with a fit of giggles. Next to him, Razor lifted his head, snow plastering his face and hair like he’d just been swimming in it.

“Why you- c’m’here!” With the same grin, Razor sent him running as he gathered as much snow in his arms as he could.

“I thought you wanted to protect me from the cold!” Even more laughter echoed through the forest as the princes had far too much fun.

“Revenge comes first, Bennett! Now come on out, I can still see you behind that tree~”

“No you can’t!”

Bennett’s screams bounced with laughter as he was mercilessly attacked with a pile of snow, having it stuffed down his coat as he was trapped against the tree. No amount of squirming helped him, as Razor only moved closer to keep him there. “Oh yes I can!”

The snow quickly turned to water in his coat, seeping into his clothes. He half expected to get some warmth from Razor with how close he was, but it seemed Bennett’s coat was keeping it out along with the rest of the cold. “I can’t believe my hero would turn against me like that.”

“Hey, you started it.” He chuckled, his arms snaking around Bennett.

“I had too, you were getting serious.” He sniffled, but that proved a mistake, as it only made him sneeze. It took him by surprise so much that he needed a moment to register it, but then he turned back to Razor with that same smile.

“Gods, what did I do to deserve you?” Razor whispered, almost in disbelief.

“Well that’s a new one, usually people just say bless you or gesundheit.”

“Sometimes I wonder how you can be just...so *you*. ”

“What brought this on?” Unable to stop his smile, he leaned back against the tree, knowing full well it would be a lie if he said he didn’t want Razor to continue.

“Do I need a reason to finally tell you how I feel?” He rest their foreheads together with a soft smile. “You make me so *so* happy, especially now. I’ve spent so long thinking you were dead and gone, so long looking for you, and now I’ve finally found you. And I...”

It was only gentle, the way he ran his thumb over his lip before he leaned so wonderfully close. He only hesitated once they were so close that Bennett could feel the subtle breaths on his lips. Almost able to hear both of their hearts beating in unison, Bennett closed his eyes and closed the gap between them.

There they stayed as time bowed to their will and slowed just for them. Snowflakes flurried around them as if only trying to draw them closer to one another. The sun turned the skies the same oranges and yellows Razor had come to associate with him, so bright, reassuring of another peaceful night no matter how long he'd be gone. The skies used all their power to give them the moment to enjoy just a *little* longer.

It was their stomachs that pulled them apart, both rumbling with the hope of food. "Someone's hungry."

"Your stomach's rumbling too, how about we find some food?" Bennett slipped out from between him and the tree, gently pulling him along by his hand.

"Going to try eat poison berries again?"

"Hey," he chuckled, "I know how to forage now, I'll find us something just to show you."

"How about we just settle for some apples?" With a flick of his hand, Razor guided Bennett's eyes to a nearby tree. Far shorter and far more alive than the towering trees that lay dormant in fear of the winter. Despite having little to no leaves, and frost-bitten branches, apples still grew. Only a few resembling drops of blood against the snow, yet they were ever so tempting. Whether or not they were there earlier didn't seem to bother either of them, instead only drawing their eyes up to the lowest hanging apple - still just out of their reach.

They took a moment to look at the fruit in silence, and as Bennett was about to open his mouth to suggest something, he was scooped up with ease and perched on Razor's shoulder. His yelp of surprise echoed around the forest before it filled with their laughter.

"A little warning next time?"

"I'll try my best, but hearing you laugh brightens my day." He stepped a little further towards the tree. "Come on, grab the apple before I drop you."

“I doubt you could even think of doing that.” Bennett looked down to see Razor seemingly struggling to hold him, stumbling back and forth to keep his balance when usually he would be as sturdy as a rock. He just chuckled and just as Bennett reached for the apple, the two toppled over, landing in a laughing heap. “Well that could’ve gone better.”

Razor sat up, flicking his ears clear of snow. “Did you at least get the apple?”

“Well...” He smiled sheepishly, then- “Ow!” The apple bounced off his head into his hands. “Yeah, I got it!”

“Honestly?” He shook his head with a smile. “I wouldn’t expect that to go any other way.”

“Me either, but I think we might be sharing this one. Unless you want me to lift you up there?”

“Something tells me that *might* end in even more disaster.” Razor held his hand out for the apple, taking his dagger in the other hand. “Here, allow me.”

The dagger cut through the fruit as if it were made from the snow around their feet. A few drops of juice fell to the ground, followed by the seeds Razor flicked out before handing over a half.

“Thanks!” He gladly took the half.

“Do you know what my favourite thing about apples is?” Rather than eating it, Razor turned his half of the apple over in his hand, holding it up to the light to inspect it. The red skin shone as he turned it, minuscule beads of juice sparkling on the flesh of the fruit.

“Uhm, the...colour?” Bennett took a bite of his half, savouring the subtle sweetness with that familiar tart undertone he knew all too well. If he thought hard enough, he could just remember how he used to sneak into the kitchens and steal apple slices with his father while Adelinde was baking whatever marvellous treats were in her recipe book. How they’d sneak down the stairs and his father would distract her while Bennett swiped the apple slices off the counter and ran away in a fit of giggles.

“No,” he chuckled, “I love how irresistible they are.”

“I guess they are,” he laughed along with him. But that was where things only *started* going wrong. One bite of the apple and his head was beginning to spin, slowly at first. He had to resort to leaning on Razor to steady himself, his unexpected silence raising concern.

“Are you alright?” He slid his hand under Bennett’s hair to check his temperature.

“Yeah, *yeah*, I’ll- I’ll be fine...” As if it was some kind of cruel trick, those words only made it get worse. With every shaking breath, his stomach twisted and turned, nausea clutching him in its grasp. On top of that, his head *ached* like he’d just been smacked with something.

“Ok- um, no, not-” he swallowed, swaying slightly, “not fine...” He tried to take a step towards what he was *sure* was the direction of the cottage, but his coordination crumbled, and him along with it.

Of course, Razor rushed to catch him, pulling him back to his feet. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I- I need to...go back ho-”

“The cottage isn’t that way, silly.” He steadied the Prince on his feet, but made no effort to take him where he needed. Instead he only tightened his grip on his arms, as if trying to keep him there.

That was when Bennett looked down, well, he let his head fall to rest against Razor, eyes falling to the floor. Nestled among the gentle blades of grass, there was the apple half, *rotting* as if it had been there for days . The rot corrupted the snack of his childhood, turning it a sickening shade of brown. Cracks of unnatural darkness ran like lightning across the sky, charging away from their own form of cloud; *where he’d taken a bite*.

“Don’t- don’t eat the...” He heard the familiar crisp *crunch* of Razor taking another bite of his half, then dropped it to the floor. It was...fine. Normal. Just as fresh as the other half should *still* be. “What-”

“Oh my sweet little Benny.” His tone...it sounded like he was *mocking* him, almost amused to watch Bennett struggle.

“Ra-Razor you...did you- do something?” His throat dried up quickly, his words scratching over the sandpaper walls of his throat.

Razor’s gloved hand lifted the Prince’s chin to face him, forcing him to witness the wickedly triumphant grin he proudly wore. “You’re so trusting, and oh so weak.” He whispered. “Did you really fall for my little trick?”

“What did-” he tried to push himself away, but rapidly weakening limbs were no use against him, “did you- what did...you do?”

He *laughed*, at his suffering, at his weakness. Worst of all, it was the most he’d heard Razor laugh. He was practically breathless under that grin, sighing in amusement. “Oh, haven’t you worked it out yet? Tsk, I thought you were smarter than this.”

“You-” he coughed, and coughed, and *coughed*. His throat was far too dry, words catching and sticking to the sides of his throat. Fumbling hands reached for the sword on his belt, but with his vision now flickering in and out of focus, and his hands barely under his control, he failed. He failed again and again, sometimes barely even coming close to drawing his sword.

“Aw, look at you being brave for once, and putting up this little fight.” Razor looked over him with a smirk, thoroughly enjoying the way Bennett swayed in his arms, how his breathing turned desperate, how he’d groan whenever his stomach took a particularly violent turn. He *revelled* in how he’d hold back his cries of pain as the usually harmless twigs and acorns struck his burning head. But most of all, he savoured the way Bennett’s eyes brimmed with tears, and how he’d blink them away to try stop at least some of his courage from melting away.

“How about I tell you what’s going to happen to you? Hm? That should scare that last little bit of fight out of you.” He leaned down, inches away from his face. Long fallen, Razor was the only thing stopping Bennett from hitting the floor, and he just used the position to taunt him more. “Oh, and I absolutely adore your little frightened face.”

If he managed to form anything clearer than a rough, scratchy plea, it would’ve fallen on deaf ears anyway, as Razor continued without a single caring thought.

“Any moment now, you’ll drift off to sleep. It’ll be the deepest sleep you’ve ever had, almost as deep as death. You’ll stay like that for five days, and your pathetic little heart will grow weaker and weaker with every one. Then at sunset on the fifth day, it’ll stop. It’s a more peaceful death than I’d like to give you, you’ve been a thorn in my side for far too long to deserve this, but watching your little friends fret and fail to save you will be so entertaining!”

Just as he said, Bennett was starting to hear the familiar sound of sleep calling, his unfocused eyes growing heavy, and his head following suit. It scraped its claws over his mind, threatening to drag him down with it. He fought it as best as he could while turning to try another escape. But his legs failed, crumpling beneath him with the first failed step. His hands failed. His voice failed. He *failed*.

“Nothing they try will work, because there’s no cure! Five days to save you with absolutely no cure! Isn’t it wonderful? All I have to do is wait and watch the show, and then you’ll be out of my way for good! How about we take you a little closer so they can find you? Hm?”

He dragged him along, watching him desperately trying to find his footing. At that point, he couldn’t even stumble, all Bennett could do was fight tooth and nail to stay awake, focusing on whatever pain he could to try make it worse within his mind. Yet sleep was much more powerful than anything he could do.

“After all, I wouldn’t want you to die in the storm I have planned. That wouldn’t be as fun now, would it?” Razor dropped him like an old ragdoll by the base of a tree, propping him up against it. To the left, Bennett could just make out the slithers of the cottage between the trees. It was right *there*.

“Now, one final detail. A little hint for them.” He crouched down, scooping up what little snow he could into his hands. Slowly but surely, the snow pile grew and shaped itself. It crept upwards against gravity’s will, snaking into the shape of a basket before the snow melted away to reveal an actual wicker basket beneath. More snow was placed in the basket, and soon it was filled with apples.

Razor laughed. Cackled. In triumph no less. As he did, his voice warped into a horrible, hoarse screeching, mimicking the same bubbly pattern as laughter. It was terrifyingly *familiar*.

Then his appearance followed, his hands contorting and cracking against Bennett’s shoulders. Swelling and shrinking, an unknown force moulded them into skeletal shapes, stretching the ends into talons. An inky black void crept through Razor’s veins before the army charged over the rest of his skin, leaving the same empty shade in its wake. Though his clothes covered more of it as they stretched into the form of that all too familiar icy blue, frost-bitten cloak. A cold aura slunk through the air to gnaw at whatever dared to enter their territory, in this case, the ever-weakening Prince.

Bennett regretted it, he wished the poison had taken him already before he dared to meet Razor’s eyes as his face transformed. Horror struck his heart like the icy dagger he’d been threatened with

so many times before. As expected, it was the Abyss Mage, but that wasn't what terrified him. *It had no mask.* In its place was an oblivion of twisted skin, skulking in subtle dark spirals around where its features *should've* been nestled among the folds. *Should've.* But there were no features, only dips and rises where they would've been if luck had been kind enough to spare him from the sight.

Framed by fur laden with shards of ice, the face - if you could call it as such - distorted in unnatural ways as what seemed to be a mouth opened. Strands of abyssal tar stretched thin between its lips, and vibrated with the waves of its screeching voice. "Now, good night, Little Bee."

He tried to speak, to call for help, maybe even beg for mercy. Even if his voice finally managed to work, he wouldn't know what to say. But it didn't matter. It was as if those words were the final sealant to his fate. The Mage released him from its grasp, and unable to hold himself up, his back slipped from where it was leaning against the tree, and he fell into the thin layer of snow. In the last fight to cling to consciousness, he turned to look at the cottage. He could've run right to it, right in the door if he hadn't been too weak to break free.

More shrieking laughter echoed through the trees, bouncing around the forest like an excited child, as the Prince was finally too weak to resist. His eyes closed, at last falling victim to the poison. After such a successful plan, the Mage danced around the air in victory with a few final shrills of joy before it returned to the safety of its stolen castle, laughing all the way.

Chapter End Notes

So we finally got to the apple, I'll admit this was unreasonably fun to write
This is unfortunately where things start getting slow because we've caught up to where
I'd prewritten BUT I promise this won't be abandoned no matter how long between
updates

Also I wanna say thanks for all the feedback and support, I'm so glad you're enjoying
reading this as much as I am writing it <3

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

This took less time than I thought it would but here we go, another chapter! :D Hope you all enjoy

By the time smoke was rising from the cottage chimney once again, the winter sun had set early, and thrown the forest into the hands of its dark counterpart. Bennett was yet to return for dinner, and the dwarves had grown worried. Sure he'd taken his sword with him, and his coat was gone so he wouldn't freeze in such a short time, but when he went off on his own he *always* came back before dark, it was the unspoken rule they all followed.

They loitered in the kitchen, most watching either the clock or the window, with only Albedo absent from the group. The forest was dangerous at night, even for experienced fighters like them. Bennett had only been learning for six months, not only that, but with his luck, it was impossible to predict what could've happened. Just to make the situation a whole lot worse, the weather had made a turn for the worse, the wind tried to pry open the windows, begging, *crying* like a child to be let in. In its tantrum, it swept up and threw the settled snow all over the forest.

By now, even Diluc looked visibly worried - or 'slightly concerned' as he'd so *insistingly* put it earlier. So it was no shock when Kaeya stood up from his place at the table. "Right, who's coming?"

Predictably, they all stood up. Diluc was first to the door behind Kaeya, wordlessly putting on his coat. One by one their coats left the hangers, weapons left the rack, and already Jean was forming a plan. "Okay, I say we check the river first, then the forest, starting in the direction of Mondstadt."

"Alright, we should probably split up- *ARCHONS ALBEDO!* " Kaeya nearly jumped out of his skin when he opened the front door and found Albedo standing right outside.

"Shall we set off then?" In all honesty, they were not only surprised to see him, but to see him actually wearing a coat while out in the snow.

They all shuffled out as he stepped aside - when exactly Albedo left the house in the first place wasn't at all clear. The cold bit at those who hadn't already clung to Amber and Diluc to warm themselves. But the second they stepped out, the snow only fell harder.

“Noelle, Amber, you two check the river! Oh, and be careful!”

“On it!” Amber lit her hand aflame to use as a source of light, the sky dark above them. The storm filled the river with rage, water rushing over itself with all the emotion of the tyrant commanding the sky above. Fortunately, there was nothing but the rocks dipping under the surface again and again. “Nothing here!”

“He must’ve gone into the forest!” Noelle called over as the two returned to the group.

“Diluc, can you send Nocta up to scout ahead?” They had to shout above the howling winds,

“Not in this weather! Even if she can stay on course, she won’t be able to see anything!”

“Then let’s stick together! We don’t want to lose anyone else!”

And so they set off into the forest, weapons in hand and lanterns to light their way. With his naturally chill only worsening, Kaeya stuck close to his brother who practically radiated heat, the snow melting beneath his feet. Albedo, with barely even a shiver, took off his coat and wrapped it around him, of course getting quite the weird look from the two.

“He can’t have gone too far, right?!” Poor Eula was suffering in a similar way to Kaeya, huddling as close to Amber as she could.

They wandered for a little while, though it was *much* longer than they would’ve liked. With the snow only growing heavier by the minute, the search only got harder. Even with the lanterns and the growing fires in the hands of Diluc and Amber, they could barely see two feet in front of them, faced with an unbreakable wall of white. They only stopped when Kaeya tripped and took Diluc down with him, melting a huge patch of snow with his natural warmth.

“Are you two okay?!” Jean called back to them, her eyes widening in shock as the fall had uncovered exactly who they’d been looking for! Half buried, Bennett lay there unbothered by the cold shell he was under, sleeping as if the snow were merely a blanket. “He just fell asleep in the snow?”

While everyone was looking at Bennett, at his ears, nose and cheeks that had turned an almost violent shade of red, Albedo had his eyes on the basket. He turned one of the apples over in his hands, as behind him, the dwarves tried to gently shake him awake.

“Bennett, come on, wake up.”

“You can’t sleep in the snow. Come on.”

“Does everyone else see this?” Albedo looked through the basket, every *single* one of the apples as fresh as ever.

“Albedo, we have other problems.”

“Apples don’t grow this time of year, none of these should be fresh.”

“They’re just apples,” Jean shook the prince again and again but to no avail, “help us over here, we could really use your expertise.”

Putting his reservations about the apples aside, he sighed and shuffled over to kneel beside them. He gently lifted his head to get a better look at him. “Slight bump on the back of the head, not enough to cause anything more than some light bruising, nothing serious, but it doesn’t account for his lack of consciousness...”

“We can heal him when we get back. Now let’s get home before anyone gets any colder.” Jean lifted Bennett with the help of Noelle and they all headed in the direction of the cottage. Yet Albedo loitered behind, still perplexed.

“Albedo, come on, don’t get lost!” Amber called back, prompting him to follow along with the basket in hand.

As they weren’t far, it didn’t take long at all for them to arrive back at the cottage. Jean and Noelle went straight upstairs, and downstairs the fire was lit as soon as the rest were through the door. Those that were absolutely freezing - being mainly Kaeya and Eula - huddled around the fire, while Albedo disappeared up the stairs, closely followed by Diluc.

They knocked gently as not to startle the healers' work, before peering around the door. "How's the healing going?"

"Oh hello you two!" Noelle's cheery attitude never went unappreciated at times like these, she always brought a welcome comfort in times of need. "We just finished, come on in."

Jean sighed with a smile as she stood up. "This feels like when we first found him."

"I'll admit, this happens a little *too* often." Diluc took a seat at the end of the bed. "I trust he'll be alright?"

"He'll either sleep through the night or wake up during it." Humming quietly, Noelle tucked the blanket further around the sleeping boy.

"I'll keep an eye on him, I'd like to study these apples as soon as possible."

"Albedo, you *need* sleep!"

"Something's bothering me about these," he held up the basket, "and I intend to find out what."

She sighed. "Just this once."

~

After such a long evening, it was no wonder almost everybody had a lie-in. Well, everyone except Noelle and of course Albedo, who just as he said, hadn't slept a wink. As Noelle cooked up a nice warm pot of porridge, the storm outside whirled even worse than the night before. It swept up the snow in its tantrum. But inside, the cook merely hummed and stirred the pot a few times before hurrying off to stoke the fire in defiance of the storm.

"Morning Noelle!"

The others chimed - a few groaned, still tired and aching - as they descended into the wonderful

smells of downstairs. She sing-songed in return. “Good morning! I thought a steaming bowl of porridge would be nice after last night!”

“You thought right, I’m pretty sure I’m still cold.” Eula dragged her chair closer to the fire, a shiver going up her spine after a glance outside.

“We’re always cold.” Kaeya joined her by the fire, though he opted to flop onto the floor with a groan, still wrapped in his blanket from upstairs. Face smushed against the floor, his voice barely made it up to the others. “How’s Bennett?”

“Didn’t stir all night.” The basket of apples spilled out onto the table as Albedo huffed in defeat.

“And how’d the apple research go?”

He sighed. “They’re apples. Perfectly ripe, perfectly normal *apples*. Though their condition, even their *existence* shouldn’t be possible as it’s not at all the right season for them.”

“We *did* tell you.”

Albedo drifted around the kitchen, gradually gathering everything he’d need for one of his elaborate cups of coffee. He even grabbed a few things from his shelf of miscellaneous jars of herbs, minerals, and anything edible he could find in the forest. Some of which they were sure weren’t *really* edible. He muttered to himself. “I’m sure there’s something wrong with them, and I *will* figure it out.”

“Breakfast is almost ready!” Noelle sing-songed, getting the bowls from the cupboard. “Oh, would someone wake Bennett so he doesn’t miss it?”

“I’ll go.” As Diluc pulled himself to his feet, his back made a loud *crack*, to which he just sighed. “I hate the cold...it always does this.”

“You could just be getting old.” Kaeya jeered from the floor, rolling in the blanket onto his back.

“Tsk, I’m only a year older than you.” With that, he disappeared up the stairs. The bedroom was

nowhere near as warm as downstairs with the fire still going, the chill hadn't been noticeable when he'd been curled up in bed. Oh how he'd love to curl back up in the cosiness. Still, he went right to Bennett and gave him a little shake. "Come on Bennett, you're going to miss breakfast."

"Look, I know about Kaeya's plot to make me say," he sighed, "*wakey wakey*. Don't tell me he got you involved too..." But he didn't even stir, not even his usual sleep-mumbles. Even when he pulled back the blankets, he didn't even shiver despite the goosebumps forming on his arms.

"Bennett," nudge wasn't a strong enough word for what Diluc tried next, nearly pushing Bennett off of his side and only his back, "okay fine, *can'tbelieveimgoingto* - Wakey. Wakey. There."

Now he was starting to get concerned, nothing he tried worked to even give him a *sign* of waking up. He just *lay* there, either ignoring Diluc or unable to hear him, and raising his voice only succeeded in causing a bit of muffled chatter downstairs.

Just outside the door there was a lot of shuffling as Kaeya wormed his way up, still tightly wrapped in his blanket as he came through. Making it as obviously reluctant as possible, he slowly emerged from the cocoon of warmth, tossing it onto his bed as he looked over at the two. "I know what you're thinking, and believe it or not, I did *not* recruit him into this one."

"That's not at all what I was thinking."

"I *absolutely* believe you." He perched on the edge of the bed, nudging him ever so slightly. "He's not falling for it Bennett."

"You really think I didn't try that? He just *won't* wake up."

"Nothing has worked?"

"Nothing. Go get Albedo."

"I'm already-"

"*ARCHONS-*"

Albedo sighed, stood in the doorway with his arms crossed. “-here...is there an issue?”

“Bennett won’t wake up. And after last night,” Diluc couldn’t help but let his eyes drift over to the window where the weather raged outside, “I’m *concerned* .”

“Well, you must be worried if you’re willing to admit it.”

“I’m not *worried*, I’m *concerned*. There’s a difference.”

“Alright you two, don’t start.” Albedo sighed like an exasperated parent, stepping over to the little alchemy table he’d set up in the corner of the room. Just behind the door there was a flurry of jars clinking together as he dripped all sorts of oils into a small glass vial, all smelling so strongly their scents carried clearly across the room. Salt went into vial, a few more drops of yet another oil, then he swirled it as he returned to the bedside. “Some smelling salts should do.”

As Albedo held the vial just under Bennett’s nose, all of them fully expected him to sit up with a gasp for air. Yet he didn’t even *stir* . “That’s...odd.”

“I’ll...go get Jean.” Diluc disappeared down the stairs.

“Bennett,” Albedo shook him again and again, concern growing in his voice, “wake up. Bennett, you *need* to wake up.”

Footsteps came up the stairs quickly, and seconds later Diluc returned with Jean, rushing back with the others loitering just outside to listen. “What’s the problem?”

“He won’t wake up. You definitely healed him last night?” Albedo immediately got to work, checking his temperature, pulse, heartbeat, all the while glancing back again and again at Jean.

“After he was out there for so long? Of course we did.”

“Try again.”

A gust of wind carried warmth around them, swirling around the bed with a soft whisper of hope. But as it faded, it took that hope with it. Jean's efforts were proven fruitless, as he still showed no sign of waking up.

"Everything's normal," again, Albedo checked his pulse, "he's just...asleep."

"If he's *just* asleep, we would be able to wake him up."

Those lingering outside finally shuffled in quietly to see the situation for themselves.

"Albedo, will one of your herbal mixes work?"

For a moment he was silent, just watching the prince sleep, looking as though nothing were wrong. But then he sighed, "without knowing what caused this in the first place, the wrong mix might make this worse. We'll need to figure out what's wrong before we can try anything."

"And how long will that take?" Kaeya had started tapping against the bed frame, glancing anxiously between his student and the alchemist.

"Well that depends on what's wrong. It could take anywhere between a few hours to a few weeks. But his condition seems stable so far, so that gives us time."

"Then let's get started!" Amber cheered with a smile to try lift the mood.

Eula nodded along. "The sooner we get started, the sooner we figure it out."

And so they got to work. While Albedo, Jean and Noelle talked quietly by the bed - muttering to each other about the few symptoms they had to go off - the others grabbed whatever books on illnesses they had and started reading. Anything they could find brought them one step closer.

Yet their search spilled over into the night, with most of them either taking a book to bed or falling asleep where they were. They went through books on illnesses, diseases, plants, even venomous animals that might have struck while he was unaware. Noelle gladly cooked and cleaned as the others desperately tried to figure out what was wrong - though even if they offered to help she

politely denied, just reminding them they needed as many minds as possible to figure this out.

~

As the sun rose on the second morning, Noelle delivered a nice warm drink to each half-asleep dwarf. Coffee for Albedo, hot chocolate for Amber, herbal tea for Eula, the many smells drifted and swirled around the room as each was handed to the recipient.

Kaeya thanked her quietly, setting his hot chocolate - complete with a mountain of cream scattered with sprinkles - next to a cup with what less of a drink and more of a dark abyss inside it. He just stared when Jean drank as if it was nothing more than water, then set it aside casually. "Did you sleep?"

"An hour or two." She yawned, dark circles already making their presence known. "But I found nothing," she sighed, "anyone else find anything?"

"Nothing over here." Amber tossed her book aside and picked up the next. "Albedo, any more symptoms to go off of?"

The alchemist had been hunched over the prince's bed at the very end of the room for as long as the rest of them had been awake. "Exactly the same as yesterday. It seems the moment whatever happened...happened, he simply...stopped."

"Stopped?"

"Just stopped. He doesn't need to drink, and I'm assuming that's the same for eating."

Noelle gave him the final cup on her tray. "Perhaps it was something he ate. But I'm sure we'll figure it out." She hummed on her way to the door leading downstairs.

"Ate..." He whispered. "Something he...ate!" With that he practically tumbled down the stairs with how fast he ran.

"What- Albedo!" They all squeezed through the door after him. Over and over, arm over leg, over

another leg, eventually they landed in a tangled heap at the bottom of the stairs, helplessly looking up at Albedo as he dived across the table.

“Noelle, did you move that basket?! The one with the apples!” They’d never seen him so frantic, desperately searching the countertops, rummaging through drawers as if their contents would disappear seconds after he opened them.

“Why- why yes,” along with everyone else, she started pulling herself to her feet, “I moved them over by the fruit bowl, I thought about making a pie with them later...why?.”

Immediately he plunged across the kitchen. The poor fruit bowl was knocked to the floor as he lunged for the basket, more specifically the apples piled inside it. Once he had one in hand, he turned it over and over.

“Albedo, what *is* it with you and those apples?” Jean stumbled as her foot was freed from Eula and Kaeya struggling to pull their hands apart from where they’d frozen together during the initial fall.

“I know I said these were normal, *but* what if they’re *not*. ”

“But again you said-”

“Ignore that. There’s *something* about them, and I think they’re what did this to Bennett.”

“How?” Eula finally unstuck her hand from Kaeya’s.

He sighed. “Listen, I don’t know how, and I don’t know why, but I’m *certain*. ”

“So can you work out what’s wrong?”

“Hopefully. I at least know what I’m working with now.” He turned the apple over in his hand. “With the evidence we’ve got, it’s most likely some kind of poison, or we may even be looking into the realm of magic.”

“But how would either of those even happen?”

“We all know.” Diluc mumbled, clearly reluctant to bring up the subject. When they all looked back at him, he crossed his arms with a scowl at the floor. “We’re all thinking it.”

He was met with silence. Their eyes drifted down to the floor because just as he said, they *were* all thinking it. Dread tied their stomach in knots, twisting and turning them over and over until there were no loose ends to find. Still, Diluc continued in a whisper, more reminding himself of the monster hiding in the walls of the castle, far closer than he’d like. “*It* got him...”

“So this could be more serious than we thought...”

“What do we do?”

For a moment, silence returned to the room as all the cogs in their brains turned in sync. They ticked away in thought before Jean shattered the silence with what they all feared. “It might come back.”

“And he certainly can’t fight in this condition.”

“Do we move him? Take him to Wolvendom?”

Noelle flinched as the wind whipped snow against the window as a reminder of the storm outside. “In this weather it’s fairly impossible to make it on foot, especially while carrying someone.”

“I suppose...all we can do is try our best to wake him up.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

A bit of a short one today but oh well, we're getting there! :D

The dwarves rushed out of the room, leaving silence in their wake. Pathetic as they were, it had to admit they were certainly determined. It peered in through the window, through the frost and the thickening sheet of ice inching over the glass. It could barely see anything inside, a few misshapen blobs of colour but nothing more. So it seeped through the cracks of the window, oozing into the room like tar, dripping onto the floor to reform in the same wicked shape it usually took. The Abyss Mage floated silently over the creaking floors as it took a closer look inside the little cottage.

Beds lining the walls, some made neatly, others left in a mess. Side tables were stacked high with books, towering over the drinks that had been abandoned moments before. Even for a being that didn't feel the cold it was so wonderfully toasty inside, no doubt they had a fire going downstairs. It was quaint, pleasant, comfortable. If it didn't have a grand castle to return too, it'd gladly take this from them.

By far, the best part of the room was in the very last bed, where the sleeping prince lay tucked away as if they could protect him from further harm. It couldn't help but do a little victory dance at the sight of him, turning and bouncing in the air like an excited child.

It leaned ever so close, whispering right into his ear. "How's your sleep, Little Bee? Oh, you don't have to answer that." The cackle that came after was unbearably persistent, starting at just a manic giggle before it grew into a sound that belonged in hell. "I know you can't!"

"I've won," Gloating, taunting tones, full of joy it deserved to feel after all these years of having the thorn lodged in its side, "Just think of how sad they'll all be when you draw your last, *pitiful* breath."

Just imagining the hope draining from the castle sent its mouth seeping into a grin beneath the mask. It was such a wonderful thought, picturing the dwarves standing in sorrow around the bed, the Wolveen Prince rushing through the forest just to be too late. Oh how much joy would it bring to stand over his grave and relish in victory.

"Oh you must be trying so *so* hard to wake up, but it's not going to work~" It sing-songed in glee. "It's *never* going to work, brat, because I'm too clever! I've finally gotten rid of you for good!"

After all, there's no coming back from death.”

As it turned to float away, it almost hummed like a lovesick soul - though it was broken and twisted, cracking with a chuckle that it just couldn't suppress, it was definitely the tune that the prince had often hummed around the castle. It had almost made it to the window, when it to cackle again and again, mocking the sleeping prince with every hideously desperate breath.

“Now sweet dreams, Little Bee. I'll visit again,” starting from its feet, it dripped down into a puddle on the floor, looking over its shoulder with a sickening grin, “once you're dead.”

With that it was gone, the inhabitants downstairs never knowing it had returned to savour its victory.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Took a bit longer than I thought it would, but we're here again! I promised I will finish this, and I will :D

No matter how hard they worked, read, researched, nothing worked. They found *nothing*. It didn't matter how many nights Albedo hadn't slept, or how often he was no longer finding himself alone after the sun went down. The Abyss Mage and its tricks didn't care how hard they worked, even far away in the castle, it was *still* one step ahead of them. It was impossible not to imagine the creature cackling as the dwarves' desperation grew, as they tried everything they could to wake the boy who was dead to the world.

After another long night, Albedo was once again asleep at the small alchemy table in the corner, surrounded by dozens upon dozens of glass vials containing a variety of coloured liquids, each with a different remedy or test that failed to help. Some bubbled feebly, others gave off a faint, wisping steam, while a few produced a thin layer of softly sputtering foam, or lay completely still. Mountains of papers littered with theories and equations piled high with no end or answers in sight.

The wind clawing at the windows, scraping branches across them, forced his eyes open to the morning of the fourth day. He sat up quickly, feeling a blanket slip off his back and onto the chair. It was barely light outside, the sun only just peeking over the trees. But even with the early morning, most of the dwarves were awake. Only Eula and Jean were still asleep, but from the book in Jean's hand, it was clear she too had been up most of the night, maybe even later than him.

The door to the stairs opened, bringing with it the overwhelming smell of coffee. In came Kaeya, looking as tired as the rest of them. "Who's awake and who wanted these again?"

"If you have one going spare, I'll take one." Albedo stood up, his back making itself known with a loud *crack*.

"It's best to let Jean sleep, so there should be a cup." Diluc took a cup from the tray, looking over at the occupied bed at the end of the room, where the source of their worry lay.

"Here," Kaeya put a cup on the desk then sat down with his own, groaning with delight as he returned to the warmth of his bed, "any progress?"

The alchemist just shook his head. “I’ve managed to narrow it down to a possibility of three. All poisons, though none of them quite match up. Most of them have more symptoms, usually physical like a rash or fever, fingers turning blue or black, but with whatever this is there’s just...nothing.”

“So have you ruled out magic?”

“It’s impossible to rule that out. There are so many spells and curses already, but if this is something new we’ll be even more lost than we already are.”

There was a bit of noise downstairs, most likely Noelle and Amber busying themselves with whatever little thing they could find. But upstairs there was silence now, just the occasional quiet slurp of a hot drink, or a cough.

Albedo looked over his work. All of his formulas went nowhere, hitting dead ends or blank conclusions, and it was the same for most of his research. Almost everything just came up... *empty*, hopeless even.

Footsteps coming up the stairs barely caught their attention, then Amber came in with flowers in her hand and they all looked up. Her appearance accidentally disturbed Jean, lifting her head from against the bedframe with a startled snore. “Oh, sorry Jean, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It’s,” she yawned, “quite alright. I didn’t mean to drift off.”

“You’ve been up all night, go back to sleep if you need to.”

She stretched her arms. “I just need a-”

“Coffee?” Kaeya held his cup out. “I haven’t had any yet, and we both know I’m not really a coffee person.”

“Thanks.” The moment the cup was in her hand, she took a huge, desperate sip for the energy she craved. “That’s better...anyone make any progress?”

“Barely.”

As Albedo went over his calculations again - starting over halfway through when Eula lifted her head with the same question - Amber listened in quietly while busying herself around Bennett's bed. She replaced the flowers on the bedside table, windwheel asters grown on their own window sills, brought in to be safe from the bitter winter. With a smile she gave them a little spin before turning to the bed itself. She readjusted the covers ever so gently, tucking him in just a little more to keep out the cold, stopping for just a moment to watch him breathing. In and out, one breath after the other, but only just. "Um...Albedo?"

"Mm?"

"You know how yesterday you said he was getting weaker?"

"Yes." He broke into an explanation no one really asked for. "Though it seems he doesn't need to eat or drink, his body is still growing weaker from the lack of sustenance. He's not dehydrating, but can't stay like this forever, so I did a few calculations. At the current rate, we have little over two weeks before he..." Glances went around the room as no one wanted to say what they feared. "Which means we still have time to fix this. It's not at all easy, but not entirely impossible. Why do you ask?"

"Well he's...he's barely breathing."

Those few words brought everyone over, some faster than others. While Kaeya and Albedo were the first two, Jean called down the stairs for Noelle. The alchemist checked his pulse, only just able to feel the steady beat, then came his breathing, just as Amber said it was worryingly weak, even more so than the day before.

"On the table are my calculations. The one on the very top of the pile to the left, that's the one. Someone go over them, check they're correct."

It was Diluc who went right over to the alchemy table without a word. He practically snatched the paper from the pile, hunching over it before he even sat down. His quiet muttering caught Noelle's attention for a moment as she hurried up the stairs. "What's going on?"

"Bennett's barely breathing- now, Albedo, what're those calculations?"

"They're a rough estimate as to the deterioration rate, as well as how long he can sustain this

condition, even if it causes long-last effects." Any questions they had were never answered, as Albedo was lost to meaningless mumbles, repeating the same symptoms he'd seen again and again for days "Pulse and heartbeat weak, barely breathing, eyes still unfocused, still not responding to anything..."

"What does that mean *exactly*?"

Kaeya swallowed the lump in his throat, his hand straining to crush the bed post it was resting on.
"It's how long he can survive like this...isn't it?"

It was ever so quiet, but still caught their attention. None of them made out what Diluc said. He didn't look at them, didn't turn around, just lifted his head and repeated. "Three or four days."

"Two or three. I- I wrote them yesterday..." He couldn't bring his eyes up to meet them, or even to look at Bennett. He just let them slip down to the ground because he already *knew* he would fail. He already had. "Even then," he continued in a whisper, "I doubt he'll last that long."

"How long do you think?" For once Noelle's comfortingly cheery attitude was nowhere to be found, she donned a solemn tone that was rarely heard.

"Well," no one wanted to discuss this, no one wanted to listen, but at the same time, they couldn't tear themselves away, "with how quickly this has been happening...tomorrow evening at the least."
"

"You said you narrowed it down to three poisons? Do you have the ingredients for them?"

"Kaeya, there's no telling if they'll work-"

He was more stern this time, not asking, *demanding*. "Do you have the ingredients for them?"

"They may make things worse."

"Or one of them might fix this!" As much as they were all worried, all stressed, it was obvious looking at him closer. He was anxious. *Unbearably* anxious.

"Kaeya-"

Nocta flying overhead with a loud screech silenced them and turned their eyes to Diluc, while his brother sat down on the edge of the bed, defeatedly. He didn't need to say anything, the others understood just from the look on his face. In complete silence, they all shuffled out and downstairs.

He sat down beside him, with Nocta perched on the pillow behind them. She gave the sleeping prince a gentle nudge, watched by both the brothers as she shuffled across and nestled on his head with a quiet, solemn chirp.

"Nocta, that's not going to work..."

She leaned down and nudged him again ever so slightly.

"You're both so quick to get attached." Diluc sighed, rubbing under her beak. "It hasn't even been a year and you think of him like a little brother, don't you?"

"Don't act like you don't as well."

"I-"

"Don't deny it either."

"I must do a bad job at hiding it then."

A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth. "It's like you're not even trying."

"I could say the same for you."

"Why did this happen, Luc?"

"Greed, a fight for power, a thirteen year long murder plot, plain old misfortune—" He turned to him when he felt Kaeya's eye burning into his side. "That...was rhetorical."

"Yep..."

"Sorry. I'm just," he took a deep breath, "*really* worried."

"Must be if you're willing to actually admit it."

Diluc chuckled dryly, absently petting his beloved falcon in the hopes of cheering either her, or himself up. "Sometimes I think I worry *too* much. Though I will admit it's mainly about you two, usually whenever you go to Mondstadt or when Bennett constantly wanders off into the forest. I know I shouldn't but..."

"You shouldn't. We can look after ourselves. Well, mostly."

He raised an eyebrow. "I hope you're not referring to yourself there too? Because you get in just as much trouble as he does."

"I do not."

"You picked a fight with a *badger* of all things, and hid in a tree from it. Bennett had to shoo it away so you could come down. Need I say more?"

"Unsurprisingly, no, you don't."

The two went quiet. They watched the falcon ever so delicately preening, not just herself, but Bennett too. Each one of her few loose feathers was carefully woven around each other to form the start of a nest. She settled down, fluffing up her feathers as if she were incubating chicks.

"You think...this is just one of those things that happens?" Kaeya muttered, barely above a whisper.

"Like?"

"Like he'll narrowly escape again, like when we found him, or when he fell off the roof, or when he fell in the river again, or out of that tree- this happens *way* too often."

"Kaeya, you...you know this is different. It's not his luck this time."

"I know but do you think there's a chance?"

Diluc looked down at Bennett sleeping away, looking as if nothing was wrong. "With what Albedo said...I doubt it. I don't want to, but I *do*."

Kaeya didn't say anything. He didn't *want* to. He'd asked, and he'd *expected* something along those lines but actually hearing it out loud made it real. *Too* real.

"Still, we can trust him to surprise us." Diluc let the falcon hop onto his hand before he stood up. A reassuring smile spread across his face, a rare sight in any scenario.

"Yeah...yeah we can." Kaeya was hoisted to his feet, nearly sent stumbling into the wall from Diluc stepping aside with a smirk. He shook his head and smiled as they started heading downstairs. "Y'know, you should show this side of you more often."

"You'd all think I'd gone mad if I did."

"Well that's true but-"

"-One of us *has* to go get them!" Downstairs, Jean and Eula were arguing over the table, both equally stressed with their voices raising by the second. With the brothers now downstairs, the only one not watching the outburst was Albedo, quietly busying himself with making some concoction in the kitchen.

"Not in this storm, it'll be a miracle if any of us can make it through!"

“They deserve to see him!”

“No, we can’t-”

“He’s *dying*, Jean!”

No one had dared to say it up until now. It made it all far too true, far too *real*. Now with Albedo desperately crushing herbs in the corner, at that moment they knew Eula was so horribly right. He *was* dying, and if the remedies failed...

“He’s dying and...they need to say goodbye...”

Albedo slowly put the bowl down. “She’s right.”

“I can make it to Wolvendom.”

“Amber, you’re not-”

“I can make it through the forest the fastest.” Already Amber was getting her coat, no one tried to stop her.

Jean sighed, as much as she hated to admit it, but they were right. “Take someone with you.”

“Only Amber and I can make it through the storm without freezing.” Diluc stepped forward to get his coat too. “And I’m guessing I’ll be heading to Mondstadt for Adelinde and Huffman...if I can find them.”

“I still think this...isn’t a good idea. Mondstadt less so, but all the way to Wolvendom?”

“Have you not been here these past few days?!”

“Eula-”

“You saw them a few days ago! And I’m sure all of us can’t count how many times we’ve heard him talking about Razor! *Someone* has to go get him.”

“I’ll be fine,” set on her decision, Amber picked up her bow and took a breath to prepare herself for the cold lurking outside, “I’ll be as quick as I can, I’ll be back before noon tomorrow.”

“You’re not leaving now-”

With that, she was gone, disappearing into the forest with a fire in her hand to light her way.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

So I finally got this chapter done, I was going to split it into two but it was better as one so it's a bit longer than usual
Anyway, here you go! :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was cold, far *too* cold. Even with her natural warmth and the constant fire in her hand, Amber shivered as the wind blew right through her. She silently thanked herself for leaving in the morning, the daylight made the forest easier to navigate.

They didn't live too far from the southernmost part of the border, it was a few hours away at most. But that wasn't what worried her, it was what came after it that was the problem. Though her skills were undeniable, it still posed a challenge. The kingdom itself was a good few hours from the border, not to mention nestled amongst the tightly knit undergrowth with no castle towering above the trees to guide her.

The wind whipped her hair around, threatening to rip it away and cast it into the sky with the snow. It was near impossible to see as far ahead as she would like, a barrier of white in her way. Already her body ached, stung from where the warmth was snatched away from her.

Still she persevered, reaching the border by noon, only made clear by the rows and rows and Shadowy Knights lined up as if they were merely toys in a children's bedroom. Equally placed, with one stood heroically at the front ready to lead the charge, armed with swords or spears. Only a few were placed on horses at the front behind the Mobdtstadt banner flying high.

Instinctively, she ducked behind a tree before any of them saw her, muttering ever so quietly to herself. "Okay, okay, just...sneak past them. You can do it. Just sneak past an... *entire* army."

Of course it took a moment or two - or five - more to summon enough courage to sprint from one tree to the next. The snow didn't help, nearly sending her toppling as her foot slipped out from beneath her. Though her yelp carried straight through the snow, it never seemed to reach the soldiers. Not a single one of them turned.

She paid no attention, instead continuing on her way. Eluding them whenever she could, squatting behind bushes and trees as often as she could. Every glance over at the army was less concerning

than the last. None of them gave her a single glance, none of them turned, suspected, or even *moved*. They didn't even pay attention to the few wildlife creatures braving the storm, some were accustomed enough to the sight of the army to use them as shelter. Birds nestled in the crooks of their necks, foxes were curled up around their ankles, far enough into the rows to be sheltered from the winds.

Stone, that's what they looked like, rows and rows of ancient stone statues stationed with guarding whatever treasure once laid here, or even to watch the forest itself. To the unknowing soul, the possibilities were endless, they could look upon the army and think of such wondrous stories, without ever being the wiser of its corrupting commander.

It was a terrible idea. She knew that. Still, Amber changed her course, instead edging closer and closer to the army. She stayed hidden until she was within throwing range. Without her gloves, making a snowball was rather hard, the snow melted quickly against her unnaturally warm hands, constantly needing more snow until it was a decent size.

It broke against the helmet of one of the knights just as it would a person. But even with a direct hit, nothing happened. Another snowball. Nothing.

Now *that* was odd, and so was the little voice inside her telling her to get closer. It was *far* more terrible idea than the last, it was awful, dreadfully dumb, possibly the dumbest idea she'd ever had. *However*, off she went. At first she snuck, wary that any one of them could move at any moment. Yet the closer she got, the more confident she became.

By now she was well within view of the soldiers, and now that she was able to see them a lot better. They were just...empty. Hollow shells of the Shadow Knights she'd seen around Mondstadt again and again.

She went right up to them, waving her hand in front of their vacant helmets, yoo-hooing for their attention, even daring to flick the foreheads of the helmets. Still *nothing*.

The sound of snow crunching behind her made her spin on her heels. Bow at the ready, arrow drawn, her eyes locked onto the slight rustle of a nearby bush. It went still, then out slunk a fox, its autumn fur standing out against its icy successor. Though their eyes only met for a second, it was almost reminding her of her urgent task, before fleeing in the direction of Wolvendom. So she continued on her way.

By the time she dragged her numb feet across the Wolvendom bridge, the sky had been dark for hours. Her eyes drooped from the late night and early morning before. Exhaustion clung to her so tightly that she was certain that if she stopped, she'd drift off in seconds. She stopped for a moment to lean on the railings, taking a breather - which of course did not please the gate guards.

"You! State your business here!" They called across, the fur on their ears bristling along with a snarl.

"I need to see Raz- the prince! It's urgent!"

"And just what is this 'urgent' business with his highness?"

"His friend is dying! Please, you have to let me in!" She got a little closer, her desperation quickly overflowing into *everything*. Her voice, her eyes, her body, every inch of her screaming for them to let her into the kingdom below.

"Hold on there, slow down-"

"*No* ! I don't have time to slow down! He's *dying* and I *have* to get Razor!"

"*Slow down*, we have questions." The two took a step forward, spears at the ready. Their faces said one thing; she wasn't getting in anytime soon. "Which friend- *hey!*"

She jumped. *Off* the bridge. By the time the guards got to the railings, she was too far down to reach. Gliding down and *very* thankful she always kept her glider tucked away in her coat. She looked down and regretted it *immediately*, even this height was enough to make her hands tremble. Still, down and down she went, passing the city layer by layer.

It wasn't quite midnight, and there were a few people still in the streets. Whoever was still on the streets and caught a glimpse of her immediately ran to the railings with confused murmurs or cries of concern. She circled around and around, hoping to find an area that at least *looked* luxurious enough to be the home of a prince.

Among all the murmurs and cries, a familiar voice broke through. Rough, coarse, and loud enough

for her to hear. “Amber?!”

Her head swivelled around to his voice. “Razor!” Just like the citizens of the city, Razor ran right to the railings as she glided across, already far too low to land safely on that layer. “Thank the archons! It’s- hold on!”

~

More than anything I want to tell you that- “No...”

I want you to know- He sighed.

You make me so, so happy- Desperate scribbles followed. He just couldn’t get it right. Choosing the right words had never been Razor’s strong suit, there were just so many to choose from, so many wonderful words he could use to finally express exactly what he wanted to say.

Sometimes he thought there were too many. He tried and tried, but none of them ever fit right. Again, he sighed, whispering to himself in the hopes that some mystical force might help him. “How hard is it to write a love letter?”

He turned away from his paper, from his shortening pencil and the growing pile of failed attempts. It was late, the evening chill had long since set in. Time had run wild while he’d been stuck on the same bench for hours, straining his brain to write what he couldn’t say.

The city was calm, quiet, almost asleep like most of its children. Then, the unexpected happened. *Amber*, of all the people he didn’t think he’d see, *gliding* into the city. “*Amber?!*”

“Razor! Thank the archons!” She drifted towards him, but downwards. “It’s- hold on!”

So Razor ran. Tearing through the streets in the direction of the nearest flight of stairs. He wove his way through the few people still out, speeding up as he realised if Amber was here one of two things had happened; something was wrong, or everything that *could’ve* been wrong was miraculously okay. He desperately hoped it was the latter.

“What’re you doing here? And in this weather?” She barely got a chance to land before he ran right up to her with his questions. He could already hear the worry in his voice, the pit in his stomach grew when he saw the look on Amber’s face. Nerves, anxiety, dread, but something closer to fear. “Did something happen?”

“It’s- well, it’s Bennett. He’s...” She couldn’t bring herself to say it, as reluctance squeezed her throat so tightly the word couldn’t come out. “I’m sorry, *it* found him.”

“ *What* - but, he promised me.” His breath shook along with hands. “He promised me he’d be fine.”

Not a single part of him wanted to believe it. But his legs were already running. Towards the stairs and up, through the streets and all the while followed closely by Amber. It was serious. He knew just from the look she gave him. From the tone in her voice. From her fear. Of saying goodbye, or that they’d be too late. Now he had the same fears, spreading like an untameable flame.

One moment Amber was there, and then she wasn’t. “You! You’re under arrest!” The gate guards were panting, blades aimed to counter the arrow she’d drawn and lit.

“Back off!”

Razor skidded to a halt. As he turned back, he tried to hide his anxieties behind a shroud of smoke, but they slunk through in a whimper as he spoke. “Stand- stand down. She’s a friend.”

They looked between each other, then reluctantly lowered their weapons and Amber followed suit.

“Now, inform my mother that I’ll be heading out for a few days.”

“Your highness, that is fairly inadvisable given the weather. And the army is still poised on the border.”

“I told you to inform my mother.” He didn’t waste any time setting off again. Both Amber and the guards jogged to keep up with him, hastily climbing the stairs.

“But your highness, the army-”

“It’s a trick. The soldiers are just empty suits of armour.”

That had Razor stopping in his tracks, and the two guards looking between each other. “Not- that’s not possible, we saw them ourselves a few days ago.”

“Yes, they were walking, talking, patrolling just like any other soldier.”

“They’re all like statues now.”

“Good.” Razor continued on despite the protests of the gate guards. “That’ll make it easier to get passed.”

“Your highness-”

“No. I *have* to go.” The gates were nearing quickly and the guards were running ahead in their desperation. “Open the gates.”

“But sire-”

“Open. The. Gates.”

With a reluctant glance at each other - and the fear of how their Queen might react to them letting her son wander off in this horrible weather - the guards pulled open the gates. And off the prince went, led by Amber as they sprinted through the snow.

~

All the dwarves looked towards the door in anticipation as it opened. For a brief second, only the harsh wind barged into the kitchen, then Diluc forced his way through and shut it out once Adelinde had squeezed through. He shivered more than ever before as he hung up his coat, then took hers.

“He’s upstairs.”

“Thank you so much.” She whispered through tearful eyes before rushing upstairs.

There was silence until the door at the very top of the stairs closed. “Well? Where’s Huffman?”

He hunched over the already roaring fire, his hands tingling in pain as the cold was burned away.
“Adelinde said he left three days ago to look for Bennett again.”

“But didn’t Razor leave to tell him way before that?”

“I didn’t stop to find out. We spoke on the way but she doesn’t know anything.”

“Didn’t you look-”

“I had to call her from the window, I couldn’t get into the castle.”

Eula was the first to rise from her seat at the table. “What do you *mean* you couldn’t get in? I thought you could sneak almost anywhere!”

“I mean there were knights everywhere, nearly double the usual amount, not to mention the eyes everywhere in the village thanks to that gods forsaken festival.”

“There’s a festival? Was there one this time last year?”

“Not that I recall.” Noelle was still busying herself with anything and everything, wiping down the table for the third time that morning. “What was the celebration about?”

“I don’t know!” Almost as soon as he raised his voice, he lowered it to nearly a whisper, looking away from all the wide eyes staring him down. “I don’t know...but it meant I couldn’t get in.”

“We need to send a message to them somehow. They raised him, after all. Could you try sending Nocta-”

“Not even Nocta could get in. Besides, how would she find him there? The only person who *would* be able to find him quickly is currently upstairs *dying* !”

“Getting angry isn’t going to solve this! It’s at least worth trying-”

“No! No it isn’t.” He sat down with an irritated sigh, his head in his hands. All the signs were there; his anger, avoiding eye contact, even the way he rubbed his temples. He was keeping something from them. He *knew* something.

“What’s going on?” Kaeya and Albedo came down the stairs, looking between each other.

“*Diluc*, ” even with Eula now looming over him, he didn’t look up. She lowered her voice, almost growling at him, “what do you know?”

“Nothing.”

“*Diluc*. ”

Everyone’s eyes burned into him and silence fell across the room as he sighed once again.

“Everyone was just gathered around some decorations, and they looked so sad, and...hopeless. I asked someone coming out of town what it was about, they said it was...to celebrate his death.”

“You mean-”

He nodded solemnly. “It’s been here, and knows *exactly* what’s going on. Probably even at this very moment.”

~

Adelinde opened the door at the top of the stairs, hesitating for only a second. She stepped into the

bedroom, her lungs screaming in relief as she released the breath she'd held all the way up. Two of the friends Bennett had made were sitting by his bed.

They looked towards Adelinde, but she said nothing. There was no word she could put to the ache in her heart. Devastated, inconsolable, *heartbroken* just couldn't even imagine describing how her heart shattered, how she wanted to scream and run to his side, how she wanted to do everything in what little power she had to fix this. She stood for a moment, gripping the door handle so hard she thought it would fracture like glass in her hand.

Opening the door had felt too similar, painfully so to almost every evening she'd cared for him. She'd usually find him already asleep, and when he was small he'd often be clinging to a sleeping Huffman. But in recent years, he'd either have drifted off by the window or with a book in hand - one about some far off adventure he'd read a thousand times over. She'd smile and shake her head as she'd tuck him in, whispering goodnight before blowing out the candle.

"We'll give you a minute." The door closed and the room was empty apart from her, and her little boy. As she tucked him in and stroked his hair, she remembered how she'd carry him to bed when he was young, whispering fanciful tales of the mythical kitsune of Inazuma, or the little woodland helpers of Sumeru. He'd loved every single one of them, hanging on every word, desperate to stay awake until the end, but by far his favourites had always been the ones about his father.

Through tearful eyes, she took a shaky breath. "Once upon a time, there was a mighty king... Now, his king had been *all* over the place, to the huge mountains of Dragonspine, to the ruins of an ancient kingdom. One journey took him to the far, *far* reaches of a land that only few adventurers had dared to brave, it burned with fires much older than you and I. And in that land of fire, was something completely unexpected. A little wriggling bundle of blankets. And inside, he found..." she paused on instinct, as every time without fail Bennett would sit up and finish for her, and she'd have to tuck him in all over again. Her tears overflowed down her face. "you. He found you."

"Oh my little one." She couldn't stop the tears as it just became so much more real, even in recent years he'd finished the story, never once fed up with it no matter how many times he heard it. "I'm so sorry. I'm so *so* sorry, I- I shouldn't have let any of this happen..."

Adelinde stopped to feel his heartbeat, nearing screaming out in agony when it took her a moment to find it. It was barely even there. Comprehending what came next was something she couldn't bring herself to do. How could she say goodbye to the boy she'd spent so long protecting, and raised like her own? All she could do was whisper apologies over and over as she held his hand.

For the second time in the last hour, the door nearly swung off its hinges, though this time not from the force of the wind. Razor was in before Amber, panting like he'd run the whole way - knowing him he probably had.

"Where-"

"Upstairs." Razor was up the first few stairs already. "Adelinde's up there now."

It was obvious he was desperate to get upstairs. There was no coat to hide his tail drooping, or his ears folding back. He stepped down from the stairs, just watching and waiting for the second the door would open. Razor ignored his coughs, the occasional sneeze, his nose running, his shivering hands.

"Oh my, you're freezing! You need a nice warm drink." Noelle put on a comforting smile, whispering to Diluc to light the stove. "Do you drink tea?"

He had to be nudged in order for him to snap out of his own anxieties and respond. "Huh- oh, yes, thank you." But they all knew he wasn't paying attention, shifting his feet until he could no longer stand it. He settled on pacing, at least it was something to do to fail at distracting himself. "What happened?"

"Did Amber not tell you?"

"I was," they all looked to her as she was still warming herself by the fire, "I was too far behind."

"He- it um, well-" Kaeya looked to Albedo for help.

"We're not quite sure how it all played out. But somehow, he ate an apple that was either given to him-"

"Then shouldn't he be fine? It's an apple-"

"-or set as a trap by the Abyss Mage. It had some kind of magic on it, spell, curse, we don't know what it is exactly."

"But, *you're* magic, aren't you? Can't you just heal him?!"

"That...was the first thing we tried." Even Albedo's unwavering hands had the slightest tremble to them. "This is more powerful than anything we can do..."

He barely registered the cup of tea being placed in hands, or the stinging of the cold leaving them quickly. Only a glance was spared to someone heading up the stairs with a few words. "*Adelinde, would you like a cup of tea?*" And the response was so quiet it was lost before two came down.

"Oh," she wiped her eyes, "hello Razor dear."

"Hello." Razor nodded in return, waving the cup up around in the air again and again until he found the table. His eyes were bolted to the door at the top of the stairs, and within seconds, his hand was hovering over the handle. Albedo lurked in the corner of his eye, getting closer and closer until he was only a few steps down.

The door seemed to open on its own, as he was too lost in his own thoughts to register Albedo leaning across. He stepped in and let his eyes skim around the room before skidding to a halt on the bed in the corner behind the door. All of him had expected to see Bennett laying in bed, looking sickly or crumbling from weakness, then he'd sit up, give him a smile and act like its light didn't flicker and falter. It would've killed him to see him like that, but some twisted, selfish part of him wished he *was*. He hated to admit it. At least then he'd see him smile one last time.

Yet he was just...sleeping, curled up on his side just like when he'd drifted off while waiting for Razor after a tiring morning of work. With his eyes closed, and his face ever so slightly squished against the pillow as if he'd only just nestled into its comforting hold, he'd never looked more peaceful.

Even so, he was worryingly still, seeming more like a doll than a person as breaths in and out blurred together into almost no movement at all. Practically dead, but still with all the colour of the living. In that state, he was missing something, the thing that made him, *him*. His bright smile, the stories he loved to tell, the laughter that bubbled in such a way only Bennett could create it, his constant trips and stumbles, and the optimism that went along with them. They were what was missing from what he'd otherwise find such a perfect sight.

"How-" Ever so slightly, he turned to the dwarf at his side. He tried to hide whatever emotions overflowed into his voice, but his inability to look away from the sleeping prince betrayed him. "How long has he...been like- like *this*?"

"Four, nearly five days now. I promise you, we tried our best..."

"And you-" he swallowed his heartbreak before it surfaced, before it was witnessed, "you think I can help him?"

Albedo stepped back, barely brave enough to say it. "Actually we...we asked you here because," he sighed, "we thought you might want to say goodbye..."

"Goodbye? But- no, can't you- but..."

"We don't- *I* don't think he'll... last the night."

"Can I...can I have a moment?"

Albedo left without another word. It took a moment after the door closed for Razor to hear his footsteps going down the stairs. He sunk down onto the next bed over, enjoying the silence for a moment as he hid from what came next. The dreaded word slunk away to the back of his mind, and he dared not touch it with a ten foot pole to escape the nausea that it infected him with.

There was silence for quite a while. He took to distracting himself with a piece of paper in his pocket, folding and crushing it over and over. Slowly but surely, he took out what was left of one of his failed letters.

It was a complete mess. Ripped along the initial folds, almost unreadable from all the anxious scrunching. Even the amount of scribbles and rewrites on the page - not to mention his atrocious handwriting - made it hard to read, but it was the words themselves that were difficult to say aloud, sticking in his throat like wolfhooks to fur. Still, he gave it his best shot, it was something he at least *wanted* to say. "This has never come naturally to me, and I don't know if it ever has for you, but- no, sorry that's..terrible, uhm. How about...I- no *sorry* ."

There were so many things he wanted to say, but so little time. He wouldn't last the *night* , that's what Albedo had said, and just from looking at him, he knew they were right. Was there any point in saying anything? If Bennett couldn't hear him then he couldn't exactly ask him to wake up and be alright, to go on another adventure with him. He'd *promised* he'd be fine, but there he was, anything but.

"Why are you so unlucky?" His voice dropped to a whisper. He reached over to take his hand, yet he stopped and just hovered there in question. Would he be cold? He'd never thought of Bennett as anything except warm, his personality, his smile, even his hands were always outwardly toasty despite spending hours in the freezing weather. Cold just didn't fit him. "You did nothing to deserve it..."

When he finally felt brave enough to hold his hand, he breathed a sigh of relief. Just as warm as before. "If anything you...you deserve to hear me say it. To say I-" Again he stopped. Any other time, he might've had the courage to say them, *those* three words his letter had miserably failed to say for him. But now he didn't have the time to stall or talk himself in or out of this. "That I-" Maybe, just maybe he didn't have to say it.

"Just don't make me say goodbye instead... *please*." It was only quick. Leaning over him, he barely hesitated before planting a gentle kiss on Bennett's forehead. It was just enough to tell him silently, to show him how he felt. Still he lingered there, leaning over him still. For how long he didn't know, as all of him was praying for a miracle.

Of course nothing would happen. What was he expecting? So, he sighed and let his eyes close in defeat.

Then, *he sat up*.

Razor didn't exactly see it, reeling back from where their foreheads had smacked against each other, but he knew he was awake. He could hear him. Coughing, rasping as if he'd truly died, desperate to need the air around him. "I'm- I'm okay!" He whispered, his voice struggling as it was withered with weakness. "What- how- no- "

He didn't at all care about the bump, or the fact that his whole head ached as if someone had been screaming in his ear for days upon end. When Razor looked up, he met with the same green eyes he'd missed, though the very clear look of horror in them was new.

"How- you're- you're *alive!*" As much as he wanted to hug him, to hold him just to make sure he wasn't dreaming, Razor could smell and almost *see* the fear radiating from him. So instead, he merely lifted himself from where he'd fallen back, and tried to perch on the edge of the bed beside him. But Bennett shifted away, eyes fixed on Razor as his hand fumbled to search the surface of the bedside table for *anything*. He said nothing, just staring at him with eyes that quickly melted into simple, pure fright.

"Hey," he whispered in the softest tone he could manage, "hey it's okay, you're okay now."

"N-no, no no *no*," his throat croaked as if it were carved from stone, all the while he inched further and further away, "hold- hold on just- stay awa- *AH!*" As Razor predicted the inevitable and got closer, Bennett only sped up, tumbling off the side of the bed. Of course Razor rushed around to help him up, but stopped when a rather fluffy white slipper was pointed at him as if it were a deadly blade.

"Benny, what's wrong?" A little confused was an understatement at this point, so Razor slowly put his hands up in what he hoped was surrender. Though, he didn't *exactly* know what was going on anymore. "And why are you threatening me with a shoe?"

"I..." he took a deep, shaking breath, "I *need* you to prove you're *you*!"

"What-"

He shook the slipper as a threat, both of them *still* acting as though it were a knife. "Prove it!"

"Okay...how?"

"Tell me..." That was where Bennett went silent, his mouth hanging open as he clearly hadn't thought that far ahead. "Tell me what made you leave that day-" he muttered to himself, "no that's stupid, they'd *both* know that."

"Both? Benny, what're you talking about-"

"*Shh!* I'm thinking...Uhh *hhh*, when's my birthday?"

Razor couldn't help but smile a little at him now - partially hoping it would help prove it was truly him - as he whispered. "Really?"

For a moment he almost saw a smile pulling at Bennett's lips too. "Hey just," he lightly hit him with the ever so deadly weapon, "just answer the question."

“February twenty-ninth.” With his hands still up, he knelt down in front of him. “Will you please tell me what’s going on?”

“One- one more, okay?” Razor gladly nodded in return, as much as he wanted to know what was going on, he could see Bennett was distressed to say the least and only just beginning to calm down. “Tell me what you said when you found me. Before Kaeya came over.”

Just from how Razor slowly lowered his hands and started fidgeting and fumbling with them, Bennett *knew* it was him. The wolf ears atop his head flicked at the question, and he pulled the face he always pulled when he was embarrassed - drawing in his bottom lip to gnaw on it, his eyes immediately drifting to the left and a little sniff perfectly in time with it all. No one, no matter how good of an actor, could replicate the way one of his sharp teeth would *always* fall to rest on the same spot of his lip; a barely noticeable indent carved from the remnants of a scar.

“I said um-” he cleared his throat, “well, I said- are you really going to make me say it?” He sighed as a nod was the answer. So reluctantly he obliged, keeping his voice as quiet and monotone as humanly possible. “I said,” he couldn’t stop a second sigh, “oh my bunny, you’re just as cute and cuddly as the day I lost you.”

Finally he dropped the slipper, barely letting Razor sigh in relief before he was tackled with a hug. They lay there for a few minutes, holding each other tightly before Razor pushed them both up to sit and lean against the bed. Bennett’s voice was muffled as he shuffled his face into the crook of Razor’s neck. “Does- does your head still hurt too?”

“Yeah... Now, what happened?”

“I bumped my head on yours, you were there-”

“Benny,” he gently lifted his head with the best comforting smile he could manage, “what happened to you while I was gone?”

“I...you’ve probably figured it out”

“All I know is that somehow, *it*,” a low growl arose in his throat at the mere mention of the Abyss Mage, “poisoned you...I think? Albedo kept talking about magic and poison and apples but...I wasn’t really thinking much.”

“So it,” his hands trembled, “it took *your* form...I thought- I thought you came back early, that everything was fine, we were safe, and it was you...” It all played out in his head again, focusing on *every* detail as if he hadn’t been there the first time. His throat was dry still, stomach now twisting, hands not just trembling, but shaking now. Sleep would be next, he resisted it before it dared to show itself, desperately not wanting to go back to the hell of his own mind, where he silently screamed himself into a state of exhaustion he could use to escape.

The gentle squeeze of another hand on his carried him back to look at Razor once again. He didn’t need to tell him, Bennett knew he was safe just from how he pulled him ever so slightly closer.
“We- I, *we* went on a walk and played in the snow for a bit before we stopped to eat, found some apples, shared one and... *yeah*, you know what happened next.”

It took Razor quite a while to get his thoughts together. There was so much to sort through, from his sympathy to concern, and everything in between - including some admittedly violent ends to the Abyss Mage. All the while they stayed there on the floor, until Razor settled on a frankly pathetic attempt at making Bennett laugh, “I can’t believe you threatened me with a slipper of all things. A *slipper*. ”

And somehow, it worked. It practically burst out of him like a firework in the night sky, bright sparks of red and yellow flying around the air with his sorely missed laughter. “Hey, *you* were acting like it was dangerous as well. Do you really think I could use it to hurt you - or anyone for that matter?”

“You never know.” He leaned across to grab it, turning it over and over in an inspection. “It could be a deadly weapon if you tried.”

“I’d have to *really* try, they’re very soft.”

“They’re yours?”

“Diluc’s. He says- *oh!* I almost forgot about everyone else!” Once he’d scrambled to his feet, he turned back to Razor with an outstretched hand and a smile. “Come on.”

Of course it didn’t *quite* go according to plan, Bennett barely pulled him up a few inches off the floor before his legs gave in after they hadn’t been given that long to recover from the days of weakness. Razor was dropped back onto the ground, and looked down to find Bennett sprawled across the floor and consequently over his legs, only just starting to lift himself up. “Maybe you should take it easy for a bit.”

“I think so, *yeah...*” This time he took a little more time to find his feet - as well as letting Razor get up by himself. But once he *was* on his feet, he went straight for the door. Just as full of life as before, maybe even more so and Razor was unbelievably glad to see it, his heart fluttering with joy,

a smile on his face from just watching him fight not to go running to the door.

It was no surprise that Bennett was beaten to the door - after shaking his head to the outstretched hand - yet he made it with a miraculous lack of stumbling. He took the first step down and very quickly realised this would be harder than he thought. Walking across the room was one thing, but going *down* stairs was another. His moment of hesitation prompted Razor to turn up to him - and being completely in view of those downstairs he got quite a few stares. Especially when he finally voiced the same offer for help. "Want some help?"

"It's okay, I got it." Of course that was easier said than done. The second he finished his sentence, he tripped over his own feet and went tumbling down the stairs. Razor didn't go unscathed, falling onto his back with a *thud* as his legs were knocked out from under him, just thankful for his grip on the railing.

Bennett groaned as he hit the wall at the bottom, opening his eyes to look up at his feet. "Ow..." Now, *up* wasn't right - but he didn't get the chance to put himself the right way before he was entangled in the biggest hug he'd ever received by whoever could squeeze between the railings, with the first being Adelinde. She pulled him into a vice-like hug - one she didn't *look* strong enough to make, while already wetting his shoulder with her tears.

"You're *alive!* I thought- I thought I *lost* you! *Again!*" Somehow he was pulled even further into the hug, practically being smothered as five more pairs of arms joined in.

"You never fail to surprise us!"

It was only when Diluc called from behind that he was released, though he didn't have the heart or the guts to pry Adelinde off of him. "Alright, give him some space. He just came back from the brink of death after all."

"You weren't up there that long," Albedo shifted his attention to Razor, "what did you do?"

Razor just shrugged, groaning and rolling his shoulder with a nasty *click*.

"I can't tell if luck's on your side or not sometimes." Kaeya chuckled with a smile, the happiest he'd been in days.

“Who knows.” It was so *him*, smiling as if nothing had happened, as if it was just another bout of his luck. This time it wasn’t quite clear if the façade was for their comfort or his, as he whispered through a few tears of his own that he tried to hide.

“I’ve missed you. *So much...*” Adelinde whispered, tears no longer trickling, but rushing like waterfalls as she sobbed and sobbed at the return of her beloved son safe and sound.

“I missed you too Addie. But...I have to ask um, are you *you*? ”

The dwarves just looked on in confusion, completely unable to predict what would’ve come out of his mouth. “What kind of question is that?”

“A sensible one considering our foe can shapeshift,” she wiped her eyes in a half-failed attempt to compose herself, “did it trick you?”

“Mhm.” The dread and expectancy of another staged betrayal was clear on his face. As she looked into Bennett’s eyes she saw the scared little boy from all those years ago. Different from the terror that the Mage instilled in him, as well as fear for himself, rather of that for her.

“Now, what would *I* know...oh, I think you were about six when this happened - you tried to sneak out and follow me to the village. You’d taken one of your father’s old coats to hide in, oh it was so big on you, I could hear it dragging on the ground all the way to the gate.”

Leaning on the table, the chairs, or just the railing of the stairs, everyone listened with an overwhelmingly warm smile. “And every time I turned around, you’d crouch down, pull the coat up over your head and whisper over and over ‘*be a rock*’. ” A chuckle went around the room.
“You barely got to the gates before Huffman was in such a panic!”

He laughed along with everyone. “I remember that, he was running so fast that tripped over me on the way over.” He gave her another *huge* hug. “Hey, where is Huffman?”

“Still out looking. Oh just imagine how surprised he’d be to find you *here*, right under our noses!”

As the two continued talking - both catching each other up - Razor squeezed past them, joining the others back at the table. He sat for a moment, rubbing his forehead with a quiet groan, as the back now ached along with it. It was only when Jean caught his attention that he looked up. “How did

you hurt the *front* of your head in that fall?"

"I just bumped it earlier."

"On?"

Most, if not all, were expecting him to say the door, or its frame, something similar. But no. Their attention was directed towards Bennett, who smiled sheepishly with a small wave. "Oh that would be me. I sat up a bit *too* quickly and- hold on, why *were* you leaning over me like that in the first place?"

"Uh *hh* , I um," he scrambled and stumbled over his words, instincts guiding his hands to fiddle with each other, "I was just...leaning over to the side table."

Though it was obvious *no one* believed him - even Razor himself wouldn't have - they didn't question it further, merely casting knowing glances and smirks around the room. Finally, mother and son pulled themselves off the floor, of course Bennett tried to hide his shaking legs that caused him to fall in the first place. They were at the table in a matter of strides, and as soon as Bennett sat down, Albedo stepped beside him.

Now, Bennett was half-expecting another hug, but he knew he - along with Diluc - showed they cared in different ways. What he was *not* expecting was what was the start of a *full* health checkup as if he were seeing a doctor. All he could do was chuckle along. "I take it, I worried you all quite a bit."

"A *bit*?!"

"Diluc was freaking out."

"That is a lie, do not believe a word he says." He kept a straight face, quietly using his hands to reheat the cup of tea that had nearly gone cold.

"He was distraught, practically in tears."

With Albedo checking his pulse, and his chair not so subtly being pulled towards Razor, Bennett put on a grin and leaned on the table - shifting across every now and again to keep up with his chair. "Oh but Kaeya, I seem to remember you *both* being distraught. Something about me and a little brother-"

"You heard that?!" Kaeya narrowed his eye in suspicion, fighting a smile of his own. "What else did you hear?"

His grin slid into the evilest smirk he could manage, stretching from ear to ear as the horror on their faces started to show. "E *everything*." Of course, he couldn't help but glance over at Razor as the chair fell still, he shrank in on himself just that little bit, his brain frazzled and overheating as it processed again and again. Bennett heard *everything*.

Suddenly Bennett was scooped off his chair and pulled onto Razor's knee, held tightly as Razor buried his head in his shoulder to hide his flushing face. He couldn't stop the muffled embarrassed whimper that escaped him, and instead of acknowledging it, he decided to just pull Bennett a little closer.

On the other side of the table, a mortified expression darted across Kaeya's face for little more than a second, before he buried it beneath his usual swagger. "Guess we have a little brother, ey Luc?"

"I didn't know you could become so attached so quickly."

A few moments ago, the sight to behold had been Bennett rising from the brink of death, but now it was Diluc, who's stone-cold expression hadn't cracked or changed, just turned an almost violent shade of red that he failed to hide behind a sip of tea. And, predictably, changed the subject entirely with a whistle.

What followed was a familiar screech, and from seemingly nowhere, Nocta glided above them all, swooping around to land on Diluc's outstretched hand. She pecked at him and ruffled her feathers to make it clear he'd just woken her up.

"Oh I'm sorry, I thought you'd be excited to see Bennett again," he looked around, then back at his beloved bird, "but if you'd rather continue your nap..."

She hopped across the table, chirping all the way along. With a flap of her wings, she flew up and landed on Bennett's head, completely ignoring his hand offered to her. "I missed you too! Were

you a good girl?"

While Diluc made a face that said otherwise, Nocta screeched in agreement. "The collection of raw meat she made next to your pillow said otherwise."

"Aw, you were bringing me food, who's the best birdie?"

She held her head up high in pride, boasting to the whole room. It was her, *she* was the best birdie.

~

Eventually the cheery chatter had to dull down as Amber drifted off in her chair. Judging from the small smile on her face, and the hum of contentment, she was remarkably comfortable given how she'd slumped over onto the table. Nocta too had fallen asleep, resuming her nap, this time perched on Bennett's shoulder. With her feathers fluffed up and head hunched down, she became a ball of fluff Bennett had no objections petting ever so softly.

Adelinde had a hold of the conversation, mainly talking to Noelle as they got along almost immediately. They mostly exchange stories about cooking and cleaning, while everyone watched on or split off into quieter conversations.

It was no surprise when Albedo turned to Bennett with the question that had obviously been burning him up inside. "If I may, do you remember what happened to you?"

"Oh, yeah! I was—" there was a sudden, yet quiet, almost puppy-like howl that caught Bennett's attention. No one knew quite when Razor had fallen asleep, but his head had been resting on Bennett's shoulder for a while, now squeezing him just that little bit tighter as if he were a teddy bear. "Aw, did you not sleep on the way?" He whispered. "You silly puppy."

Little did he know that Razor's howl - no matter how small it was - had caught everyone's attention and was now watching them. All except Albedo who cleared his throat quietly. "You were saying?"

"Oh right, so," with a smile, and an attitude that was far too joyful and bright, he briefly glossed over the horrific details, hiding his quivering hands under the table. Usually he was a great storyteller, after all he'd learned from the best and could now create images of fantastical worlds and thrilling adventures with only words. However this tale was much different. He skimmed over

so much, left so much up to their imagination that they knew there'd been a reason Albedo held off the question for this long. His voice wavered and his eyes drifted away.

"And, um, he- it, *it*... t- transformed in front of me just as I...y'know, fell asleep." Recounting it all *again* now made his whole body shake and shiver as though the cold claws of his tormentor had him in their grasp. He could feel his heart racing just as it did back then, eyes stinging with tears he dared not let show.

"You make it sound...like you weren't scared at all."

"I," he swallowed everything he felt, banishing it to the depths of his mind where he could deal with it alone, "I know it would turn out okay. It...always does." He put on a smile as fake as anything, sending concerned glances around the table.

All his shaking woke Nocta with a start, she gave him a little nuzzle and settled back to sleep. "*Hm* -huh?" It woke Razor too, and he took a few moments to grasp his surroundings and pull himself out of sleep properly. For one, he forgot where he was. Two, everywhere was looking his way. And three, he was holding a rather upset looking Bennett - no matter how hard he tried to hide it.

"Sorry, um..." his mind was swirling so much he couldn't think of much else to say.

"Benny..."

"I just, sorry..." He hid his face in his hands as his eyes blurred and began to flood. On the other side of his hands, there were a few soft whispers after Razor gave a questioning look to everyone else. "I'm fine I promise, just... *sorry*."

"You just came back from the brink of death, you don't *have* to be okay." Kaeya softened his tone to one the others thought him incapable of.

"Not to mention everything else you went through."

"Sweetheart, you've been so brave," Adelinde leaned over with a gentle kiss on his head, "but for *far* too long."

"I," slowly but surely, he lifted his head from his hands, his eyes already red and wet as he'd become desperate not to cry, "I have?"

"Mmh, you're allowed to not be fine every now and again."

They gave him a moment of peace to let himself *not* be fine. He thought over and over and over, shrinking in on himself with every one. The unshakable shield of a smile that he was always hiding behind shrank and surely crumbled bit by bit, until there was nothing left but a withering, trembling mess of tears. Tears that had built up for years and years, those of a little child clinging to the hopes his dad would return, those of the young boy who'd prayed to whoever he could to take him and his family far away, those of the young man who'd missed his family without realising he was making a new one.

Maybe he *had* been a bit too cheerful, a bit too brave, said he was fine a few too many times. He'd buried *everything* except the excitement and optimism he was born with, becoming a smiley ray of sunshine that was never dulled by clouds. But letting it rain felt...nice. The droplets, even salty ones, would form a puddle he could play in later. So he kept crying, silently until it bubbled up with a hiccup or two.

And even now, it wasn't himself he cared for. "I- I thought it *killed* you..." he looked over at Razor with his tear-ridden face, "I thought you were gone and it- it would come after you all next after I..."

"Oh Bennett..."

"All that time we were worrying about you, you were worrying about us?" When he nodded, almost all at once they got to their feet - waking Amber in the process - as they shuffled around the table to join in with the hug Razor started.

"You're really something Bennett."

Even through a curtain of tears, even after all that fear, he couldn't help but smile.

Chapter End Notes

We're almost at the end now! But don't worry, I've got a whole series of fairytales just

like this lined up for you all :D
I hope everyone had a wonderful holiday too! And happy new year!

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